

Should We Care About the Existence and Well-being of Future Generations?

An Inquiry Into The Non-Identity Problem

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Abstract:

In this century, one of the biggest challenges we face as a collective human race, is the problem of climate change. Already we have seen the climate changing, with the prognosis being that the effects of climate change will only get worse. In fact, only in a few hundred years, our planet may be completely uninhabitable. However, in discussing how best to reduce the effects of climate change, there seems to be one overarching unanswered question; should we really care about the existence and well-being of future generations in the first place? Should the answer to this be negative, then that means we shouldn't worry too much about the detrimental effects climate change may have on future generations. The reason this comes in to question is because of the non-identity problem; a problem which points to the fact that one cannot regret actions that also caused one to exist. In this thesis, I will be discussing the non-identity problem and possible ways to solve it. The non-identity problem sheds light on a few intuitions we may hold about existence and harm. These intuitions, that I will later formulate as claims, will need to be challenged if we are to stand a chance in solving the non-identity problem. These three main intuitions will make out the majority of the discussion in this thesis. The first claim to be discussed is that ethics is person-affecting. Secondly, I will discuss the claim that we have been benefited by coming into existence. The third and final claim I will discuss is that it is not possible to be harmed by an action without also being worse off by that action. I will argue that we should hold a person-affecting view in ethics, rather than an impersonal view. I will also defend the claim that our existence begins at conception, and building on this, argue that our existence is neither a benefit nor a harm to us. Instead I will suggest that we understand it as morally neutral. I will also discuss in favour of the idea that it may be possible to hold that one can be harmed without being worse off. I will conclude that the non-identity problem is in itself not possible to solve. In this thesis I offer two possible solutions. The first is that it is already the fact that we care about the existence of future generations, and for consistency's sake, we should also therefore care about their well-being. The other solution I offer is that we take the butterfly effect more seriously, understanding that separating which specific action one's existence depended on, is so difficult that it makes the non-identity problem seem less significant.

Sammendrag:

I vår tidsalder, har klimaendringer stått frem som et av de største utfordringene vi står ovenfor som en samlet menneskehet. Vi har allerede sett endringene i klimaet, og forskere anslår at de fremtidige effektene av klimaendringene bare kommer til å bli verre. Det er mulig at planeten vår ikke lengre vil være beboelig innen kun noen få hundre år. Når vi diskuterer hvordan vi best skal gå frem for å hindre dette utfallet, virker det som at vi jobber utifra en antakelse som ikke har blitt diskutert; skal vi i det hele tatt bry oss om eksistensen og levetilstanden til fremtidige generasjoner? Skulle svaret her bli 'nei', så vil det si at vi ikke egentlig trenger å bry oss så alt for mye om de enorme konsekvensene dette vil ha for fremtidige generasjoner. Grunnen til at dette kan bli stilt spørsmålsteget ved, er ikke-identitetsproblemet; et problem som peker på det faktum at vi ikke kan angre på handlinger som også har forårsaket vår eksistens. I denne avhandlingen vil jeg diskutere ikke-identitetsproblemet, og mulige løsninger eller tilsvær. Ikke-identitetsproblemet belyser et utvalg av intuisjoner som vi kanskje kan ha i forbindelse med vår eksistens, og det å tilføre skade. Disse intuisjonene, som senere vil bli formulert som påstander, må utfordres hvis vi skal få en mulighet til å løse ikke-identitetsproblemet. Disse tre hovedintuisjonene vil utgjøre majoriteten av diskusjonen i denne avhandlingen. Den første påstanden som vil bli diskutert er at etikk er personpåvirkende. Den andre påstanden er at vi har mottatt en fordel ved å begynne å eksistere. Den tredje og siste påstanden jeg kommer til å diskutere er at det ikke er mulig å bli skadet av en handling, uten også å være i en verre tilstand etter at handlingen har blitt utført. Jeg argumenterer for å holde seg til ideen om at etikk er personpåvirkende, heller en upersonlig. Jeg kommer også til å forsvare påstanden at vår eksistens starter ved unnfangelse, og videre på dette argumentere at vår eksistens er verken en fordel eller en ulempe for oss. Istedenfor vil jeg foreslå at vi forstår vår eksistens som moralsk nøytral. Jeg kommer også til å diskutere til fordel for ideen om at det kanskje er mulig at man kan sies å bli skadet av en handling, uten at handlingen har forverret ens tilstand. Jeg kommer til å konkludere at ikke-identitetsproblemet er i seg selv ikke mulig å løse. I denne avhandlingen vil jeg tilby to egne forslag til videre løsning. Først vil jeg påpeke at det allerede er et faktum at vi bryr oss om eksistensen av fremtidige generasjoner, og for å være konsekvent bør vi også dermed bry oss om at de har det bra. Den andre løsningen jeg tilbyr er at vi tar 'the butterfly effect' på alvor, og forstår at det å identifisere hvilken spesifikk handling(er) vår eksistens avhenger av er så vanskelig å finne ut av, at det gjør ikke-identitetsproblemet mindre betydelig.

I would like to express my utmost gratitude to my supervisors, Espen Gamlund & Jesse Tomalty,
Without them, this thesis would be non-existent.

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Introduction

In this thesis, I will attempt to answer the question of whether we should care about the existence and well-being of future generations. This is a question that comes to light when discussing intergenerational ethics, where we try to determine how to best act towards people that exist at different times than ourselves. Many of us may intuitively believe that we have such a moral responsibility to care about those who will come into being after ourselves, but finding such a foundation based in something other than a shared intuition, has proven to be difficult. The reason this is difficult to establish is because of something called the non-identity problem. This problem seems to question the possibility of us harming anyone that will come into existence in the future. It seems imperative to try and find a solution to this non-identity problem in order to find some moral accountability towards future generations. The non-identity problem is a fairly new problem in philosophy, and was first made known by the late Derek Parfit in the 1980's¹. Throughout this thesis I will focus on the non-identity problem, and its possible solutions. This is in order to attempt to answer the main question, namely whether we should care about the existence, and then by extension also the well-being, of future generations. This problem, and also intergenerational ethics as such, has become exceedingly important due to the overarching threat of climate change. Never before has there been such a monumental worldwide threat to humankind, where those who will take the brunt of the consequences will be the people who do not yet exist. When we are discussing intergenerational ethics, particularly future generations, we face the challenge of determining what kind of obligations we actually have towards them. In our current times, we are facing an overwhelming threat of climate change, and the detrimental effects it has already had, and will continue to have, on our planet. However, there still seems to be a significant segment of the world's population that isn't convinced that we are facing climate change, or instead believe that the consequences do not pose a threat to our lives.

In this thesis I will build my discussion on the fact that the threat of global climate change is real, given that this is what the vast majority of the scientific community believe. If we are to believe all the predictions that scientists have made with regards to climate change, it would seem we won't have to travel too far into the future in order to find a practically uninhabitable planet. This means that we are facing some important decisions with regards to future generations. Even though asking

¹ Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*

the question of what our moral obligations are, and how we best should account for their future are all important questions for us to answer, this will not be my main priority in this thesis. Instead, my aim is to clarify if in fact we have reason to care about the existence and well-being of future generations *in the first place*. There seems to be a commonly held intuition among most people that we should in fact care about future generations. Finding out what specific reason we have to believe this, seems to be more complicated. It is important for us to find such a reason because intuitions can change throughout the years, and without these actual determinable reasons, we won't necessarily be able to secure either the well-being, or the actual existence of future well-being. Only after we have successfully established the fact that there *is* a moral obligation can we move on to establishing what our moral obligations actually consist in. Given that climate change is such a monumental and global threat to the human population, I will use this as an example throughout the discussion when attempting to answer the question of whether we should care about the existence and well-being of future generations. The question of whether or not we should care about future generations is deeply affected by the non-identity problem, and I will shortly elaborate further on this problem. As I mentioned, I am presuming that climate change is real, and that it will have the effects that the scientific community has predicted. But first we must then clarify why climate change actually constitutes a harm to us.

In his book *Climate Matters - Ethics in a Warming World*, John Broome lists several reasons why climate change is in fact a harm to us, and why we have a moral responsibility to prevent its further development.² I will not go into too great detail here, but shortly mention a few, in order to establish the fact that causing emissions, and therefore causing climate change, can constitute a harm. One of the reasons Broome points out is that the harm that is done by our emissions is the result of something that we do.³ What is meant by this is that we are making an active decision to create emissions, it is not something that happens naturally, or independent of us.⁴ This is important because many people tend to make an intuitive distinction between when we are actively doing harm, and when we are not doing our best to prevent harm. We are responsible for being active in *doing* a wrong, not just responsible for choosing not to, or not being able to, *prevent* a wrong. A

² Broome, *Climate Matters*, 55

³ Broome, *Climate matters*, 55

⁴ At this scale. There are of course some cases in which we have possible changes in climate due to natural changes on the planet, in large cycles as well. However, the rapid change we have seen now is as a result of something that we *do*. This is all in agreement with what the vast majority of the scientific community states.

second reason he lists is that the harm that is done by our emissions is serious, and will have very serious consequences.⁵ There is some disagreement in the scientific community concerning how harshly climate change is going to affect the planet. However, even in the best case scenario, the changes will have a massive impact on the planet's ecosystems, and will affect the lives of millions if not billions of people. In fact, the estimation made by the World Health Organisation is that between 2030 and 2050, 250 000 additional deaths per year are to be expected.⁶ This severity seems to indicate that we in fact have a responsibility to take action against climate change.

He also points out that the reason we are creating our emissions is for *our own* benefit, it is not something we do for others.⁷ For the most part, we are driving cars and flying in planes that takes us to places we desire to be. Emissions are not a byproduct of some other benefit we are attempting to attribute other nationalities, nor future generations.⁸ It would perhaps be more acceptable, Broome argues, if the emissions created were a byproduct of some altruistic action we were taking, but given that this is not the case, this also points towards it being a harm to us. Finally, I would mention that Broome makes it clear that we could quite easily reduce our emissions after all.⁹ We are informed of how to do so, and the sacrifice should not seem large compared to the benefits of the future generations.

Now that we have established this, we can go on to looking into whether we can in fact harm future generations. This is a thought that comes into question in light of the non-identity problem. I will throughout this article look back to the harms done by emissions and therefore climate change, and see how different approaches to attempting to solve the non-identity problem will affect future generations in these cases.

In light of the non-identity problem and the threat of climate change, I will use the following structure to attempt to answer the question of whether we should care about the existence and well-being of future generations. In the first chapter, I will make a thorough presentation of the non-

⁵ Broome, *Climate Matters*, 55

⁶ <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs266/en/> Downloaded: 06.02.2018 kl: 12:56

⁷ Broome, *Climate Matters*, 57

⁸ Of course, they can be. Many of the things we take for granted to do daily in the western world, cause emissions. However, it is not solely by creating benefits for others that we create emissions, most of the time it is for our own comfort and benefit.

⁹ Broome, *Climate Matters*, 58

identity problem. This is followed by an introduction of a few non-identity cases, that serve to demonstrate that the non-identity problem is not some abstract and distant hypothetical problem. Instead, these cases are intended to prove that the non-identity problem actually poses some real problems around the moral decisions we make in our everyday lives. Following from this presentation I will single out three intuitions that the non-identity problem brings to light. I will formulate three claims that seem to underlie these intuitions. These three claims will then serve as a guide towards the discussion throughout the thesis.

In the third chapter, I will discuss the first claim. This claim is one that has its own line of discussion in contemporary philosophy. It regards whether we should consider morality to be something impersonal, or whether we should consider morality to be person-affecting. The claim here is that our identities matter in making moral decisions. I will show that the non-identity problem does not occur on an impersonal view, and does therefore not pose a problem to those holding the impersonal view. I will argue in favour of the person-affecting view, showing that this is not only the correct view to apply with regards to future generations, but also the view we should be holding when making moral decisions regarding currently living people. During the course of this chapter I will also present a few objections and proposed solutions to the non-identity problem, both within the impersonal and the person-affecting views. Some of these objections are more convincing than others, but they will all be included to show the scope of the discussion in contemporary philosophy.

In the fourth chapter, I will address the claim that we are benefited by coming into existence. I will answer an important question here, namely ‘at what moment do we *begin* to exist?’ This question is important to answer, in order to pinpoint exactly what kind of circumstances actually constitute a non-identity case. I will here argue in favour of taking conception to be the moment of our coming into existence. Following from this I will discuss whether we can be said to have been harmed or benefited by coming into existence. I will argue in favour of neither of these positions. Instead I will argue that due to lack of any possible comparison, we can only regard coming into existence as morally neutral. I will also discuss what seems to be an asymmetry of harm, and whether there is any kind of coming into existence that can constitute a harm to us.

Given the conclusions from the preceding chapters, I will in the fifth chapter discuss whether it is possible to be harmed or benefited by an action without also having to be worse off or better off as a

result of this action. I will discuss the definition of harm, and whether this definition is sufficient, or if a new definition is needed. I will also mention what the different perceptions of harm will actually mean for future generations, particularly in regards to climate change. In the sixth and final chapter of this thesis, I will present my own proposed solution to the non-identity problem. I will focus on two arguments in particular. Firstly I will defend the claim that the butterfly effect has such an overarching impact on human life, that it renders the non-identity problem obsolete. The second suggestion I have regards the *reason* behind why we wish to procreate, and that these reasons could be considered to be self-centred. I will argue that so long as we create human beings out of our own desires, and we do care about the existence of future generations, we should then by extension also care about their well-being.

1. The Non-identity Problem

1.1) Introducing the Problem

When attempting to answer the question of whether or not we should care about future generations, we often encounter the non-identity problem. The non-identity problem is something that comes to light in the question of intergenerational ethics, and problematizes the idea that we are subject to the same moral rules regarding future people as well as currently existing people. The non-identity problem begins with the story of our existence. According to a vast calculation, the odds of you coming into existence is approximately $10^{2,685,000}$ ¹⁰. This is due to a lot of different factors, the most important one being that if any other sperm cell had reached the egg first, you would never have come into being. This number is also derived from the odds of your parents meeting and then deciding to have children. From the moment you came into existence you were already defying odds that were heavily stacked against you. Often when thinking about our own lives, we might say that if we had a different father, for instance, we would be a completely different person. Thoughts like these make less sense than we perhaps initially think. If another sperm cell had reached the egg first, there wouldn't be any *you* in the first place. You would not be a *different* you, *you* would in fact, not exist at all. The other sperm cell that hit the egg would instead form a completely different person, with a different consciousness. This shows that the fragility of our specific selves coming into existence is, in our everyday lives, often neglected. This thought is at the core of the non-identity problem, and is important for us to keep in mind if we are to understand it correctly.

In 1980, Derek Parfit first coined the term 'the non-identity problem'. Many philosophical questions span back hundreds, even thousands, of years, but the non-identity problem is quite a recent discovery. The problem came to light in the context of discussions about intergenerational ethics, a field of ethics in which we are concerned with questions regarding future and past generations, such as '*What rules should determine how we should behave towards future generations?*' When attempting to answer this question, the non-identity problem came to light because it challenged our thinking about what we were discussing; the well-being of those who have not yet begun to exist. It would seem difficult to apply the same rules towards currently living

¹⁰ <http://www.businessinsider.com/infographic-the-odds-of-being-alive-2012-6?r=US&IR=T&IR=T>
11.01.2018, 14:55

people and people who may only *potentially* exist in the future. This is problematic due to one simple fact; that every individual on earth, might never have existed in the first place. This all hinges on the previously mentioned fragility of our existence, and how much it depends on the specific time and the specific circumstances of our coming into existence. In his book *Reasons and Persons*¹¹, Parfit introduced something he called the ‘Time Dependence Claim’. It is defined as follows:

Time Dependence Claim: If any particular person had not been conceived at the time he or she was, he or she would never have existed.¹²

Within a secular framework, and judging by purely biological standards, this is not difficult to accept.¹³ Upon the moment of conception your genetic map has been created, determining many of the defining features that make you who you are. This Time Dependence claim can serve as our first clue, showing why it can be so difficult making these decisions that regard problems that are seemingly only relevant to people that do not yet exist.

There are a couple of examples that best highlight these kinds of problems, most commonly used are perhaps the ones of climate change and abortion.

At times we might find ourselves wondering what our lives would have been like if we had been born at a different time or place. Perhaps we might wonder what we would be like if we had different parents. This could be a good cognitive exercise in empathy and understanding, but if we refer back to the Time Dependence Claim we quickly see that it makes no sense to actually consider these questions. This is because when questioning these things, one is ignoring the quite simple answer, namely that it wouldn’t be you in the first place. There lies here perhaps a sense of comfort for those who have difficulty coming to terms with the conditions by which one came into existence, because no matter how dire the circumstances, they were necessary in order for one to exist.

Given the Time Dependence Claim, you could, in fact, only have come into existence at the specific time, and in the specific manner that you actually did. This claim points out precisely how fragile our existence actually is. As we have now seen, the Time Dependence Claim lies at the center of the

¹¹ Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*

¹² Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, 351

¹³ I would also like to clarify that this whole discussion will take place within a secular framework, meaning that any form of religious argument will not be discussed or mentioned due to lack of relevance.

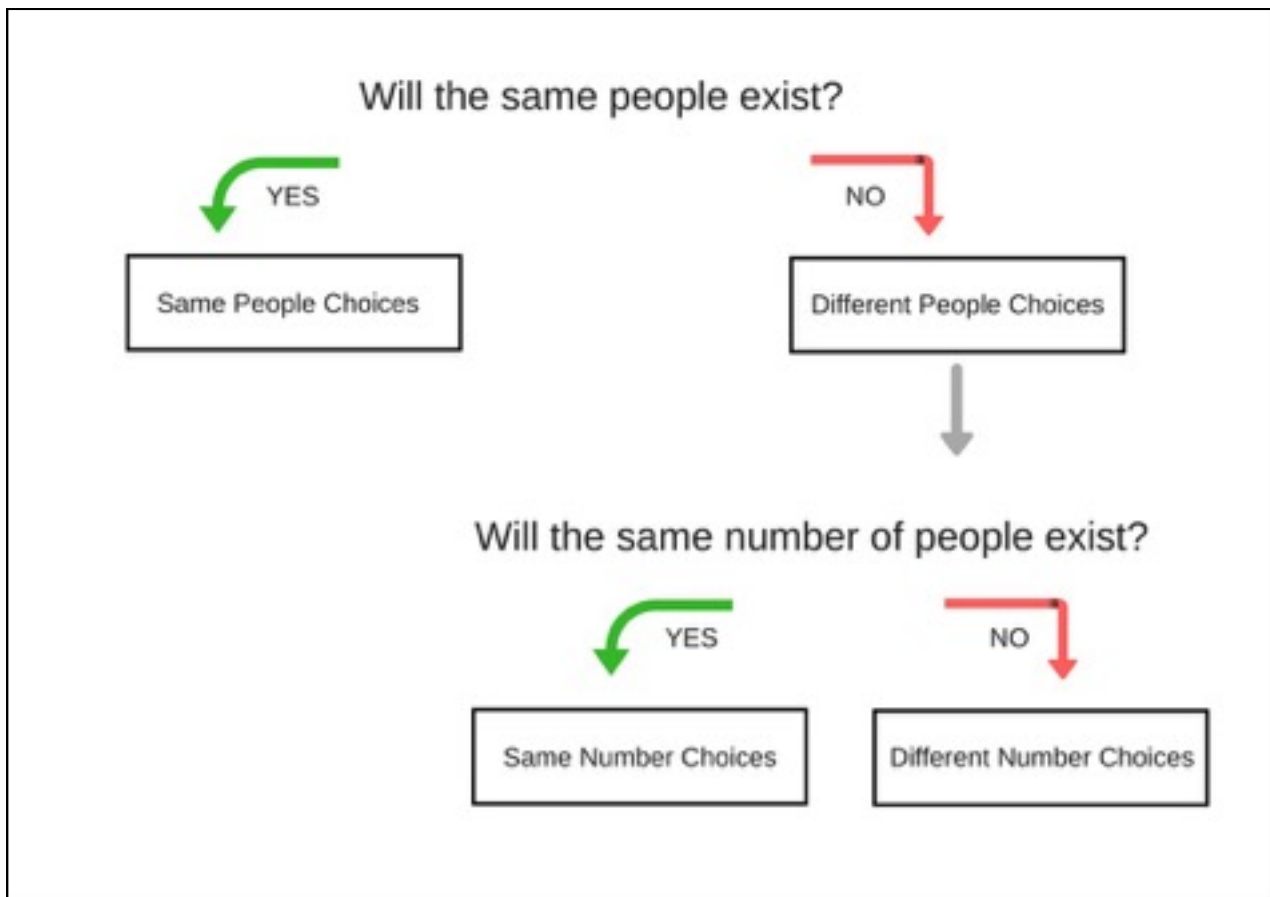
non-identity problem. In order for us to accept the non-identity problem, we must also accept the Time Dependence Claim as a premise for the argument.

When we are discussing what actions to take with regards to future generations, we must look carefully at how far in the future these generations are. The further in the future the discussed future people are, the bigger the consequences could be for the way we choose to act towards them. Climate change is an example of this. If we choose to not make changes to our lives, then climate change will escalate in its severity. Those who have contributed nothing to climate change will then be dealing with the worst, and most severe consequences. Also, the further in the future the non-identities exist, the more complicated it will be to attempt to determine the outcome or consequences of our actions, along with what the desired outcome even would be. In order to keep our minds clear within this discussion, Parfit proposes to distinguish between the different decisions we may have to make regarding future generations.¹⁴ These decisions have to do with what the potential outcome will be of the different decisions we make. If we are confronted with two different scenarios, we must ask the following questions:

1. Will the same people exist in the different scenarios if we take this action?
2. Will the same number of people exist in the different scenarios if we take this action?

The diagram he set up, looks as follows:

¹⁴ Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, 355



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Parfit pointed out that a lot of the time when discussing different moral actions to take in our own daily lives, we are discussing scenarios in which we are faced with Same People Choices. We tend to imagine the same individual in two different scenarios, and then we proceed to determine which one of these scenarios is actually the best. This means that the identity of the person in discussion does not depend on the outcome of our decision. This will of course concern all moral decisions regarding currently existing people - since they already exist, their existence is not threatened by our decisions. According to Parfit, this isn't the most useful way for us to think about moral decisions regarding future generations. This is because these Same People choices are realistically very rarely the case in this framework. In fact, most of the time what we are really discussing is whether that specific individual in these imagined scenarios will ever really come into being *in the first place*. The said individual's existence hinges on the outcome of our decided actions. This means that within these discussions we are usually facing Different People Choices rather than Same People Choices.

¹⁵ Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, 356

At the core of the non-identity problem lies one simple question, and that is how can we claim to have harmed someone, if that persons existence relies upon the alleged harm?

With regards to climate change the question will be that if we do not leave a habitable planet for future generations, have we then harmed them when the alternative is them never existing in the first place?

1.2) Intuitions Challenged

When we are facing moral questions, whether they are Different People Choices or Same People Choices, we often find ourselves questioning things that we would usually find intuitive.¹⁶ When discussing the non-identity problem, and the challenges it faces us with, there are especially three intuitions that come under fire. These three intuitions, or claims, are also the ones that I will challenge throughout this thesis, and will give the discussion its foundation.¹⁷ Throughout this discussion, we will find that a lot of our intuitions and premises rely on answering a number of *different* questions (as often is the case in philosophy). It is important to try and untangle this web of confusion. However, questions that are dependant upon one another can at times make this discussion difficult to keep in an ordered fashion. I hope by presenting the non-identity problem through these three intuitions that I can give some structure to these questions.

The first intuition that comes into question is whether it should be considered a benefit to us that we exist. One commonly shared view is that ‘life is a gift’, and that we should be grateful for existing, therefore implying that we have received a benefit by coming into existence. But is this in fact true? In what way can life be a gift? In what way can we be benefited by coming into existence? Many people will believe that bringing into existence a life that is unavoidably flawed, but not so flawed that it constitutes a life not worth living at all, is therefore not a harm to that specific individual being brought into existence. To give an example, if a woman gives birth to a child that will without

¹⁶ A point can here be made that this really is just philosophy in general - a challenging of our intuitions.

¹⁷ I would also mention that we may have differing intuitions about these things depending on religious occupations for instance. The intuitions I have listed will not necessarily be shared by everyone. However, the point is to bring forth the questions we really need to answer in order to answer the main question of the thesis.

question be born with a disability (for instance blindness¹⁸), that child is not harmed by coming into existence. Let us refer back to the Time Dependence Claim. Given our knowledge of genetics, and the fragility of existence, we will remember that if the child did not have that specific congenital disability, then that specific child would never have existed in the first place. There was always only *one* possible outcome for that specific individual, and in this child's case, it was that of being born blind. If we wished that the child that was born wasn't blind, the blind child would have been replaced with a different identity altogether, and therefore it cannot be bad for that individual to be born in these circumstances with these specific genes. This and similar cases raise the question of whether we can be benefited or harmed by coming into existence, a question to which I shall return.

The second intuition that comes to light when discussing the non-identity problem, is that one must be worse off in order to be harmed. As we have seen, if the alternatives to the conditions we have are that we do not exist, then the action that caused our existence cannot have made us worse off. The claim is that if one has not been worse off because of an action, that action cannot be said to have harmed us. Is it possible to say that some existence-inducing acts can be wrong even though no one is actually *worse off* from these acts? This intuition becomes central when discussing the former question of whether we can be benefited or harmed by existence. If we for instance were to decide that it is harmful for us to come into existence, then any act that causes us to come into existence would be considered harmful to us - given that we would now be 'worse - off' by coming into existence. If we refer back to the diagram on page 18, we will see that what we are discussing is Different People Cases, and this means that even though we may be comparing two different worlds, where one is objectively better than the other, there doesn't exist one single individual that we can actually point to and claim has been made 'worse- off' because of an action. There is undoubtedly a difference between these two projected scenarios, but no one can be said to be 'worse off', since there will necessarily be different individuals in these different scenarios. The question we must then answer to challenge this intuition would be: Can someone be harmed without being made worse off?

The third intuition is one that comes to light as an important premise for discussing the first and second intuitions. This intuition is that morality is person-affecting. What this means is that one believes that in order to determine whether an action is morally good or bad, the action has to be

¹⁸ This is an example of a birth defect that will have a big impact on an individuals life, but not so much that it will constitute a life considered not worth living.

morally good or bad for *someone*. As opposed to an impersonal view, which claims that an action can be bad without a specific person being made worse off because of said action. What the non-identity problem shows us is that it is not possible to be made worse off by an action if the same action caused you to exist in the first place. This means that there are a great deal of actions which can lead to undesirable future worlds for future generations that we can choose to bring about, but which still cannot be deemed a harm towards future generations. If there needs to be a specific someone that is harmed (ie worse off) in order for us to have caused a harm, it seems that there is no way we can be morally accountable towards future people. This is perhaps the most important intuition to challenge, given that if it stands as is, there seems to be absolutely no foundation on which we can secure the wellbeing of future generations. The claim that is based on this third intuition is that morality must be person-affecting. The following discussion will be based on these three claims, and the problems that they incur.

I should also mention that apart from the non-identity problem, there are also other concerns when we are discussing future generations. One of these things is time, and the uncertainty of it. It could be argued that if time is to be considered a fourth dimension, then distance in space is actually irrelevant when we are determining our moral responsibilities. This means that we are, in principle, just as morally obligated towards someone on the other side of the planet, as we are to those who are physically very close to us. The main difference we usually see in the two is not in principle, but in our psychological perception of our responsibilities. We often tend to perceive that the wrongs that we witness are more important for us to correct than the ones that we do not personally witness, or the ones that we instead might even be in denial of. For example, we may sense that we have less of a responsibility towards the Syrian refugees currently seeking asylum in Europe, because their country is quite distant from ours, both geographically and culturally. However, as Peter Singer has pointed out, we are just as morally obliged towards them as we are our neighbours¹⁹. If we agree with this principle, that distance in space is irrelevant in determining our moral responsibilities, why then should distance in time be any different?²⁰ If we subscribe to this principle, then why, in principle, should we not have equal responsibilities towards people who live in a different time than

¹⁹ Singer, *Famine, Affluence and Morality*, 232

²⁰ A metaphysical argument can be made in four-dimensionalism, that space and time hold equal value as dimensions that make up the universe. A four dimensionalist would then perhaps see no difference in distance in space to distance in time when determining our moral responsibilities. I could elaborate a lot more on this, but for simplicity's sake just leave this as an interesting thought.

ours? If we look pragmatically at the problem, the obvious answer is that the difference lies in the fact that people may be separated from us geographically, but they do in fact already exist. The other difference lies in *uncertainty*. As we become more and more globalised, it becomes a lot easier for us to discover what is currently happening on the other side of the planet, than it is for us to discover what will happen not where but when, for instance in 100 years' time. It is also easier to predict the *consequences* of our actions in the distance in space rather than time. Therefore, making decisions about what the morally responsible thing to do is, with only a fraction of the information available to us, makes it all the more difficult to decide *how* to act. Particularly when discussing intergenerational ethics, looking towards the next generation, we have a great deal of information to determine what the morally correct thing to do is - regardless of which theory of ethics one is committed to. If we however try to make decisions regarding generations that are more remote in the future than the next one, we will see that it is much more difficult - both practically as well as psychologically. We could find ourselves discussing the well-being of people whose *grandparents* have not yet come into existence.

It is in many ways a good starting point for us that we as a society in the western world, and in most other cultures of the world, tend to share a common intuition that we should care about those who will come after us in *some* form or other (whether that is restricted to our own offspring, or to the human population as a whole). Evidence of this can be found everywhere, from our need to set our affairs in order for our descendants, to the policies we fight for and make though we might ourselves never reap the benefits from ourselves. Many of us also believe that we should do our best to leave a sustainable earth for future people, letting them have the same opportunities and, perhaps even better ones, than we currently have. But, if we look at the policies put in place regarding climate change, it is clear that not enough is being done. It would seem that a great deal of people are not yet convinced by the threats of climate change and some are not concerned about the well-being of future generations. As we have now seen, the non-identity problem poses a challenge to our intuitions. In any case, our intuitions may be a poor guide for us to base such important decisions on. Therefore we should discuss whether we have any reasons that can give a basis for why we should or should not care about the existence and well-being of future generations.

1.3) *Non-identity Cases*

A lot of the discussion on the non-identity problem can seem quite abstract and hypothetical. In the introduction I presented the case of climate change, and how this is a relevant problem in which the non-identity problem shows up. However, there are other less daunting examples that can be useful in order for us to get a precise idea of what the non-identity problem actually entails. This is to show that, though seemingly quite theoretical, the non-identity problem is actually a problem that can concern aspects of our everyday lives. Perhaps one of the most cited examples, is Parfit's example of a 14-year-old girl²¹ who has accidentally become pregnant. She is torn on whether to keep the child, or have an abortion. In trying to make a decision, she consults friends and family, who mostly give her the same advice: She is too young to be a mother, and it would be better if she were to wait ten years, when she will be able to better take care of the child. The argument here is that the child is better off with an older mother, meaning she should terminate the pregnancy and try again at a later point. The problem with this example is that if the 14-year-old girl instead has a child later on in life, it can not possibly be the same child. Given the Time Dependence Claim, the child will in fact only have this one chance at being born, and any other being that should come into existence later cannot possibly be that same one. What this means is that when we are using this form for argument, what we are truly saying is (in that in claiming that it is better for the child if she waits), that it is better that this child not exist *at all*. It is *better* for this child to never exist, than to have what would undoubtedly be a difficult start in life. Here we see a clear example of a non-identity case, in which we sometimes forget the Time Dependence Claim altogether.²²

Another non-identity case concerns historical injustices. In this kind of case we do not address the moral problematics of the creation of new life and generations, but rather we see the non-identity problem retrospectively. An example of this would be if African Americans in the US decided to claim retribution for the wrongs committed against their ancestors. There is no doubt that injustices have been committed, and that the government responsible for these injustices should condemn their past behaviour, perhaps even so far as offering a formal apology and some sort of monetary retribution towards the victims of the injustices. Failing the possibility of giving retribution to the

²¹Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, 358

²² I would here note, that there are many fair arguments, such as the mothers well-being and ability to become a mother in the first place, that can be valid. But I'm only here pointing to the argument of claiming that she will be a 'better mother to the child' in ten years, does not make sense.

victims, perhaps retribution could be rewarded to the descendants. It is not uncommon legal practice to reward the descendants if the directly affected victim cannot claim retribution himself/herself. However, it will be difficult to justify how this should take place. For the people who exist now to receive the compensation would not exist if it were not for those specific injustices. This means that the same people who wish away the injustices, also are contingent upon those injustices. So whilst we can be certain that an injustice has taken place (because the crimes committed were from a party of existing people towards another group of existing people) the difficulty arises when we try to establish whether the descendants of the victims have been harmed or not by these actions.²³ The other problem is also in determining how reliant their existence was on the injustice in the first place.²⁴

A third example involves wrongful life claims. These claims often refer to legal cases, where charges are brought against for instance medical personnel. The claim could for instance be that the personnel have either failed to inform a couple of the risks of their procreating, or they have failed to prohibit these risks of congenital disabilities in a proper manner.²⁵ The claim is here founded on the idea that the child has a 'wrongful life' because that child has a certain damaging congenital disability. However, the key here is that the congenital disability was unavoidable given again the Time Dependence Claim. That child could only have come into existence at the specific time, and with the specific genetic code that it did. Therefore, if the child did not have the congenital disability the child would not exist in the first place. This leads to the claim that the child has a 'wrongful life' to be problematic, for this was the only chance at life this child had. If the claim is that the child has been harmed by this action, then it is difficult to explain how he has been harmed. There have been several cases where these lawsuits have not been won by parents, because the defence has successfully argued with (either knowingly or not) the basis of the non-identity problem.

²³ In the modern discussion of racial inequality in the USA today, there is a strong case to be made that these descendants still feel the consequences of the injustice in the inequality and suppression they experience every day, as a direct consequence of slavery. Therefore, in this case it could be possible to argue that the harm that has taken place is in fact still *ongoing*.

²⁴ It should also be mentioned that this can be a general problem regarding the non-identity problem as well, for how can we truly determine that an action cause another? We have no omnipotent insight to see this in any case.

²⁵ For instance a failure to take proper tests, or to successfully perform sterilisations when this has been requested from the couple themselves

1.4) Conclusions

I have in this chapter introduced the non-identity problem, and presented several cases that exemplify why it is problematic. The non-identity problem represents a theoretical challenge for our thinking about what our moral obligations towards future generations are. This is especially important bearing on the issue of climate change, but I have also presented a few cases that are perhaps less daunting than climate change. This is in order to show that, though theoretical in nature, it can have some quite real consequences in our everyday decisionmaking. I have also looked into three intuitions that the non-identity problem brings to light. The third intuition I discussed regards that someone must be harmed for an action to be immoral. The question that comes to light here is whether morality should be considered person-affecting or instead impersonal. Establishing this is important in order to further the discussion, as many possible solutions will be invalid when we decide to commit to one of these views. The first intuition I discussed regards the idea that our lives are a benefit to us. The question this intuition brings to light is whether we can be benefited or harmed by coming into existence. The second intuition is that one must be made worse off in order to be harmed. The question this intuition highlights is whether or not it is possible to be harmed by an action without also being worse off because of that action. These three intuitions highlight three important questions. These three questions will make out the main portion of the discussion throughout this thesis, and will be discussed in the order mentioned above, in the following chapters.

2. Impersonal or Person-Affecting View

Now that we have become more familiar with the non-identity problem, we can look into the possible ways in which we can attempt to solve the problem. As I mentioned in the foregoing chapter, there are three main intuitions that seem to be challenged by the non-identity problem. The best way of looking into possible solutions to the non-identity problem is by addressing these three intuitions, looking into whether they are completely false. I will in this chapter address the third intuition I mentioned. This intuition regards whether identity matters in moral decision making. Some philosophers who have written on the non-identity problem (most notably Parfit himself) subscribe to an impersonal view of morality, rather than a person-affecting view. I will argue against the idea that morality can be impersonal, and I shall begin by clarifying what these different views are. The reason I would like to begin with this, is because I find that only a subscription to one of these views will be relevant with regards to the non-identity problem; It seems necessary to clarify this before diving deeper into a discussion on the non-identity problem. This is because the non-identity problem only appears as a problem if we are holders of the person-affecting view. If we do not believe that an action needs to harm a specific individual in order for it to be considered morally wrong, then the non-identity problem will not appear in the first place. I will begin by clarifying which of these views we should be using, in order to make an attempt at solving the non-identity problem.

2.1) *What are the impersonal and person-affecting views?*

The clearest way of making a distinction between the impersonal and the person-affecting views, is that one view claims that identity matters in making moral decisions, and in the other it does not. What is meant by this is whether a specific individuals harm or benefit is relevant to moral decision making. In the impersonal view, the harm does not need to belong to an individual. This means that a harm can be done without it affecting a specific individual. But within the person-affecting view, someone has to be *worse off* because of an action in order for us to claim that a harm has taken place. In the impersonal view, one does not believe that identity makes any difference in moral decisions. This means that there is no conflict when discussing Same People Choices or Different People Choices²⁶, because whether the identity is contingent on a certain act, makes no moral

²⁶ Look to chart on page 18

difference to us. The philosopher Elizabeth Harman presents the following definition in her article ‘Can We Benefit and Harm in Creating?’:

Impersonal Explanation: The correct explanation of the impermissibility of the action is not that it harms: it does not harm. Rather, the action is impermissible because the world is better if the action is not performed; it is impersonally better, though it is not better for any person.²⁷

This definition shows clearly what the impersonal view entails. In terms of the discussion of actions towards future generations, it is not the fact that the action harms that causes it to be morally impermissible. Instead, it causes the world to be a worse place - though not for one specific individual. On the other hand we can hold a person-affecting view. Through this view we will find that whilst Same People Choices can call for a certain kind of decision making, Different People Choices are much harder to make. In the person-affecting view the specific identity is highly relevant, because if there is no specific person being worse off because of an action, there is no way to establish that action as a harm. In other words, the harm needs to belong to someone.

Utilitarianism is an example of a form of impersonal view. The main idea of utilitarianism is that the morally right thing to do, is that which causes the most happiness for the largest amount of people²⁸. Now, who those people specifically are is not really relevant in making these decisions. Instead, simply put, the aim is to maximise the amount of happiness in the universe. If we instead hold the person-affecting view, we are discussing the happiness of a single specific individual, instead of a large interchangeable group. As mentioned earlier, Parfit believed that we can only find a solution to the non-identity problem through an impersonal view of ethics because any other view would leave future generations vulnerable to any act towards them being morally permissible.

With regards to climate change, it would seem as if the impersonal view would be the best view for us to hold. There are multiple reasons for this. Firstly, an impersonal view gives us the ability to compare two hypothetical groups of people, where we can determine one future to be better than the other, and then proceed with creating the better alternative. This could mean drastically decreasing our emissions, making sure that we are securing a habitable planet for the future human population. If we were to determine that the impersonal view is correct, we would of course stumble upon ethical dilemmas of how much conservation of which resources we should proceed with. These are

²⁷ Harman, *Can We Harm and Benefit in Creating?*, 90

²⁸ <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/utilitarianism-history/#ClaApp>, 07.05.2018 15:11

all things that Parfit and other philosophers have discussed in great detail.²⁹ In other words, how much should we sacrifice for the betterment of the future? These are all interesting questions that could be addressed through an impersonal view, but will not be the main focus of this thesis.

2.2) Which view will help solve the non-identity problem?

In 2.1 I mentioned how an impersonal view answers my main question quite well, especially with regards to climate change. However, I still am not in agreement with an impersonal view of ethics, and there are two main reasons for this. Firstly, it seems odd to claim that an impersonal view in ethics can lead to any form of solution to the non-identity problem. The reason I perceive this to be unconvincing is that the non-identity problem is only a problem *so long as we hold a person-affecting view*. If we subscribe to the impersonal view, then there need not even be a reason to care about the non-identity problem *in the first place*. One way of dealing with the problem then, is to show that there isn't a problem, and this can be done through subscribing to the impersonal view. The reason for this is that there seems to be no reason to discuss the non-identity problem in the first place, if we subscribe to the impersonal view, because it is simply not a problem since identity *doesn't matter at all*. However, I have some objections to the impersonal view of ethics, which means that subscribing to the impersonal view of ethics to dissipate the problem, will not be sufficient. This does not mean that one has to completely deny the validity of an impersonal view in ethics in order to find it fruitful to discuss the person-affecting view, and therefore attempt to find a solution to the non-identity problem. There could of course be another way of understanding the phrase 'solving the non-identity problem' that would be a bit more charitable towards Parfit. What Parfit was looking for was a way in which we can find a form of moral obligation towards future generations. The non-identity problem is a problem *because* it seems to show that there is no way in which we could do anything morally wrong towards future generations. If we are looking for a way to find some sort of moral obligation for us with regards to future generations, then perhaps one could argue for an impersonal view of ethics. As I also mentioned earlier, this could more easily lead us to some sort of solution on how to address climate change. But, as it comes to solving the

²⁹ This can be evidenced through the different attempts at solving the non-identity problem, such as Parfit's repugnant conclusion and absurd conclusion, Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, 381-414

non-identity problem in and of itself, there is no solution or reason to discuss this problem at all within an impersonal view. Even if the impersonal view more easily could tell us what to do with regards to future generations, this isn't reason enough to subscribe to it. I think that the non-identity problem still needs solving if we are to find an answer to whether we should care about the existence and well-being of future generations.

Given that the non-identity problem only occurs in the person-affecting view, this view is then the one I will base the discussion in. I would conclude that a person-affecting view is the only view that makes sense, whether discussing Same People or Different People Choices. One could also suggest that we use one view for currently living people, and another for non-existent beings. However, it seems strange to have such levels of uncertainty on such a serious matter. I will come back to this at a later point. If we hold an impersonal view, the non-identity problem isn't really a problem to us in the first place. Given this, I will throughout the rest of the discussion assume the person-affecting view. First I will present a few less convincing proposed solutions (both impersonal and person-affecting) to the non-identity problem, then I will move on towards a deeper discussion on the two other intuitions that the non-identity problem challenges.

2.3) Possible solutions to the non-identity problem

There are several ways to go about in finding solutions to the non-identity problem, though it seems that very few have been particularly successful. Some of the proposed solutions seem overly simplistic, whilst others instead produce results that seem difficult to agree with. In his article *The Non-identity Problem*³⁰, Jorg Chet Tremmel lays out some objections to the idea that the non-identity problem actually has to be a problem in the discussion of intergenerational ethics.³¹ These objections are supposed to in a sense represent solutions to the non-identity problem, by way of showing that it needn't be a problem in the first place. Some of these objections Tremmel labels as 'unconvincing' and others as 'convincing'. Although I disagree with his categorisation of these objections, I will mention the same ones as he presents, so as to have covered the most common

³⁰Tremmel, *The Non-Identity Problem: An Irrefutable Argument against Representation of Future Generations?*, 4

³¹ Tremmel, *The Non-Identity Problem: An Irrefutable Argument against Representation of Future Generations?*, 4

objections or solutions that are relevant to this discussion.

The first objection that he claims to be unconvincing is the objection that “People are more than their DNA”.³² I have mentioned this objection earlier, and already discussed it as an unconvincing objection. The idea is that we are more than just our DNA, our identities are formed throughout our lives and we cannot be reduced to simply a genetic map. As Tremmel answers himself: “However, the proponents of the non-identity argument need not claim that. For their argument, it is enough that genes are *one factor* in making a person what he/she is.”³³

I agree with Tremmel’s conclusion of this being an unconvincing objection to the non-identity problem. The idea that we do not have complete personhood just because we have a genetic code, does not take away from the fact that a significant part of who we are and who we are going to become, has at this point been determined. Instead of producing a counterargument to this objection, we can instead here see that it is not really relevant to the discussion in the first place.

The second objection entails the idea that we actually do have moral responsibilities towards future people, even if their identities are indeterminate to us.³⁴ At face value this seems like a quite convincing idea, especially if one happens to be a defender of the impersonal view of ethics. However, this objection is often formulated by use of example where harm is done without the perpetrator knowing its victims. The example shows us that the indeterminacy of our victims does not mean that we are any less morally accountable for the actions we have taken. “If we break a bottle at the beach, we have an obligation to pick up the pieces and throw them in the rubbish bin, not in order to protect any *certain* person from injury, but to ensure that *no one* will be injured.”³⁵ This objection is fine if we are discussing same people choices, but with regards to future generations that is not always the case. What we are discussing with the non-identity problem is dependency, not indeterminacy. This means that it is not just the case that we are unsure about the

³² Tremmel, *The Non-Identity Problem: An Irrefutable Argument against Representation of Future Generations?*, 5

³³ Tremmel, *The Non-Identity Problem: An Irrefutable Argument against Representation of Future Generations?*, 5

³⁴ Tremmel, *The Non-Identity Problem: An Irrefutable Argument against Representation of Future Generations?*, 6

³⁵ Tremmel, *The Non-Identity Problem: An Irrefutable Argument against Representation of Future Generations?*, 6

identity, but the identity has come into being *because* of the action. This separation is important to keep in mind when we are trying to solve the non-identity problem, but this objection poses no threat to the non-identity problem in itself. I agree with Tremmel's perception of this as a rather unconvincing argument.

The third objection he mentions is that the snowball effect from the non-identity problem isn't really such a big deal as we make it out to be.³⁶ This objection entails that we can perhaps admit that the non-identity problem is a real thing, but that it will not affect that many identities. The objection entails that perhaps some identities will be affected by certain actions, but the overall changes will not be so big as we may fear. I have previously mentioned that the scope of the non-identity problem can in fact be massive, particularly with regards to climate change. Parfit mentions this himself in *Reasons and Persons*:

Suppose that we are choosing between two social or economic policies. And suppose that, on one of the two policies, the standard of living would be slightly higher over the next century (...) It is not true that, whatever policy we choose, the same particular people will exist in the further future. Given the effects of two such policies on the details of lives, it would increasingly over time be true that, on the different policies, people married different people. And, even in the same marriages, the children would increasingly over time be conceived at different times.³⁷

Certain events or policies can alter the genetic shuffle³⁸ to such an extent that they change every identity that would have come into existence only a few hundred years into the future from now. This means that the objection that the consequences need not be that vast, isn't very convincing, something Tremmel also concludes.

The fourth objection that Tremmel mentions is that of reincarnation.³⁹ The idea is that if reincarnation is possible, then the non-identity problem is not real. If there are a certain amount of souls in circulation that are predetermined to enter certain bodies, then the identities we are born with will not be affected by different circumstances - the souls we have will be the same regardless. Since I am writing my thesis within a secular framework, this doesn't really apply to this discussion

³⁶Tremmel, *The Non-Identity Problem: An Irrefutable Argument against Representation of Future Generations?*, 6

³⁷ Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, 361

³⁸ However I will mention that the answer to this objection of the altering of the genetic shuffle will lead to another objection that I will address in the next subchapter.

³⁹ Tremmel, *The Non-Identity Problem: An Irrefutable Argument against Representation of Future Generations?*, 8

in the first place. Opening up for such argumentation also opens up the possibility that we could argue that we have a predetermined destiny, including who will have children with whom, and at what time. Discounting the whole idea that changes in policies and events will alter any form of path for any of us, meaning that the non-identity problem isn't real. Given the fact that I wish to keep such claims outside of this discussion I shall not elaborate on this objection in too much detail. "In conclusion we can state the theory of reincarnation is not internally contradictory or illogical. Even if, like all matters of faith, it is not accessible to scientific methods or proof, it is nonetheless, no less than other religious beliefs, a "rational comprehensive doctrine" in the Rawlsian sense"⁴⁰ Tremmel disclaims the objection because he believes we must follow western thought in this sense, because an important characteristic of political philosophy is that it remains neutral when it comes to questions of religion. I would agree with him here, given the scope of my thesis.

Another objection is one that has come as a response of one to Axel Gosseries' argument.⁴¹ This argument precedes the argument that formed Tremmel's 'your neighbours' children argument', and is an objection raised by a daughter criticising her father for the amount of emissions he has, and continues to create. We are to imagine a conversation between the said father and daughter.

Imagine then a father having to face his daughter. At seventeen, she has become a Green activist and asks him: 'Why did you not choose to take your bike rather than your car? The atmosphere would be much cleaner today! And given your circumstances at that time, you had no special reason not to take your bike!' The father may want to answer: 'True. Still, had I done so, you would not be here. Since your life in such a polluted environment is still worth living, why blame me? I certainly did you no harm. Which of your rights did I violate, then?' Some will find the father's answer at best misconstrued, at worst shocking. And still, the way out may not be as obvious as it seems.⁴²

However, Tremmel points out that the Daughter could in fact counter back:

Very clever, Daddy. But have you ever stopped to think that our neighbour, Petra, who is also seventeen, also suffers from the exhaust from your car? She's part of the next generation too, and I can't imagine that the fact that you drove your car had anything to do with the point in time when she was conceived. So your behaviour is unfair to all members of the coming generation, maybe except to me.⁴³

⁴⁰ Tremmel, *The Non-Identity Problem: An Irrefutable Argument against Representation of Future Generations?*, 9

⁴¹ Tremmel, *The Non-Identity Problem: An Irrefutable Argument against Representation of Future Generations?*, 9

⁴² Tremmel, *The Non-Identity Problem: An Irrefutable Argument against Representation of Future Generations?*, 9

⁴³ Tremmel, *The Non-Identity Problem: An Irrefutable Argument against Representation of Future Generations?*, 9

Here the daughter has shown that, in this case, the scope of the non-identity problem may perhaps apply to her, but it does not in fact apply to everyone else. In certain cases, this argument might be convincing. However, when we are discussing intergenerational ethics of such a large scale, including the case of climate change, then we do not necessarily have the same solution before us. In a sense, this is a more convincing objection than the other ones so far presented, however I do not find that any of the aforementioned objections get closer to tackling the non-identity problem on a generational scale.

The final objection that Tremmel presents, is in my opinion the most convincing one of all six. This is the case of the ‘butterfly effect’. The butterfly effect is the idea that small causes can have larger effects.⁴⁴ Originally used as a theory about weather prediction where the statement was that a butterfly flapping its wings on one side of the country could cause a tornado on the other side of the country many weeks later. The idea is that very small changes can alter the chain of events that take place, and therefore also things such as who comes into existence in the future. I am certain that we all have personal experiences with how small changes can end up altering our life a great deal. The butterfly effect is a claim about causality, and proves in the same way as the non-identity problem does, that small changes can alter the future a great deal. This also means that the potential snowball effect of the non-identity problem can be massive, contrary to what Tremmel himself believes. It also shows us how difficult it can be to connect causes and their effects to one another, and determining which factors went in to determining an identity.

The non-identity-thesis misinterprets the cause-effect relationship. In view of the countless decisions which all help determine which egg cell and which sperm cell will combine, it would be misleading to pick out one and make it causally responsible for the effect, in this case the conception and later birth of a child. In other words, the non-identity argument describes causalities which are not provable⁴⁵

This is in my opinion by far the most convincing argument. The fact that we attribute certain actions to causing certain people to exist, disregards all the minor other actions that we have *no* objection too, that also may have caused us to exist, at least have been a participating factor. This butterfly effect also brings me to one of my own objections to the non-identity problem, that I will discuss in the final chapter of this thesis.

⁴⁴ <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/chaos/> Downloaded: 18.04.2018 kl: 13:23

⁴⁵ Tremmel, *The Non-Identity Problem: An Irrefutable Argument against Representation of Future Generations?*, 10

There have been proposed some solutions to the non-identity problem without turning to an impersonal view. I will discuss the proposed solution by David Boonin, what he calls the ‘Bite the Bullet’ theory.⁴⁶ Boonin is a philosopher who holds the person-affecting view. In his article *Solving the Non Identity Problem*, Boonin divides the argument into several premises. He does this by using a common example in this discussion, quite similar to the one that Parfit and Algander use, presented earlier on in this thesis. Boonin uses the same example as Parfit, namely that of two medical programmes.

The cases of Betty and Wilma are as follows:

Betty: Betty takes her newborn baby for a checkup. The doctor says there is some good news and some bad news. The bad news is that, as things now stand, the child is going to develop a handicap. The doctor explains that the handicap will be significant, meaning something that uncontroversially diminishes one’s quality of life in a non-trivial way (e.g., more like blindness than colour-blindness). It will be non-terrible, meaning that although life with this handicap is considerably worse than life without it, it is nonetheless clear that it does not come close to making life worse than no life at all (assuming that such a thing is possible). And it will be irreversible, meaning that once the disability develops, there will be nothing that anyone can do to treat it. The good news though, is that Betty can prevent all of this from occurring simply by giving the baby a tiny pill once a day for the next two months. The pill is easy to administer, has no side effects, and will be paid for by Betty’s insurance company. Fully understanding all of this, Betty decides that having to give the baby a pill once a day for two months is too inconvenient and so chooses to throw the pills away. As a result, she ends up with an incurably blind child rather than a sighted child.

Wilma: Wilma is not yet pregnant, but is planning to try to have a baby and so goes to the doctor before conceiving. The doctor says there is some good news and some bad news. The bad news is that if Wilma conceives, as things now stand, she will conceive a child with a significant, non-terrible, irreversible handicap. The good news, though, is that Wilma can prevent this from occurring simply by taking a tiny pill once a day for the next two months before conceiving. The pill is easy to take, has no side-effects, and will be paid for by her insurance company. Fully understanding all of this, Wilma decides that taking a pill once a day for two months before conceiving is too inconvenient and so chooses to throw the pills away and conceive at once. As a result, she ends up with an incurably blind child rather than a sighted child.⁴⁷

The first question is whether these cases are morally equivalent, and whether they are morally permissible, or morally impermissible. First of all, the cases are clearly different. Betty’s case involves a *Same Person* choice, whilst Wilma’s is a *Same Number* choice. In his article, Boonin attempts to solve the non-identity problem by going thoroughly through the premises that make up the argument. The hope is that he will be able to disprove one of the premises, showing that the

⁴⁶Boonin, David. “How to Solve the Non-Identity Problem.” *Public Affairs Quarterly* 22. nr. 2 (2008). 129-159

⁴⁷Boonin, *How to Solve the Non-Identity Problem*, 129-130

non-identity problem is not an actual problem.

Boonin here lists the premises that lead to the Non-identity problem:

P1) Wilma's act of conceiving now rather than taking a pill once a day for two months before conceiving does not make her specific child worse off than she would have otherwise been.

P2) If P's act harms Q, then P's act makes Q worse off than Q would have been had P not done the act.

P3) Wilma's act of not conceiving now rather than taking a pill once a day for two months before conceiving does not harm anyone else.

P4) If P's act does not harm Q, the P's act does not wrong Q

P5) If P's act does not wrong anyone, the P's act is not wrong

Conclusion: Wilma's act of conceiving now rather than taking a pill once a day for two months before conceiving, is not morally wrong.

We can in these premises see the aforementioned intuitions that I identified in the first chapter.

Firstly the intuition that one is benefited by existence, leading to the question of whether or not we can be harmed or benefited by coming into existence. Secondly the intuition that someone needs to be 'worse off' in order for an action to be harmful to us, leading to the question of whether one can be harmed without being 'worse off'. Thirdly the intuition that someone needs to be harmed in order for a harm to take place, leading to the question of whether ethics should be person-based or impersonal.

In his article, Boonin addresses all of these different premises but concludes there is no sufficient solution. This means that all the objections that have been raised to the previous premises, are not sufficient to actually destroy the argument of the non-identity problem. Given this, Boonin does not attempt to solve the non-identity problem, but instead supposes a 'Bite the Bullet' theory. Here, he suggests that we must accept the non-identity problem head-on, and accept that Wilma in fact does nothing wrong. This seems to go against our intuitions, but Boonin points out that the only reason

we perceive it to be as such, is because we struggle to keep clear a distinction in our minds. This distinction is between Same People and Different People choices. He explains the intuition as follows:

They arise not because they accurately reflect more basic beliefs about the behaviour in question, but rather because our moral sentiments are such that they produce misleading results in such cases. This claim is supported by the fact that our intuitions are different in other cases which are otherwise morally similar, but lack the distorting features of cases that give rise to the apparent problem. Once this becomes clear, we have no reason to reject the conclusion of the non-identity argument.⁴⁸

It seems as though Boonin's answer to the non-identity problem is to claim that there needn't be one in the first place, and that we should instead refer to the non-identity problem as the 'Non Identity argument'. And that the circumstances into which someone comes into existence, cannot determine that someone was harmed, therefore they are morally permissible. However, simply stating that something is not a problem, but rather an argument, does not actually solve or change the fact that there is a problem.

The 'Bite the Bullet' theory can have quite radical implications to our moral obligations, particularly in regards to climate change. In fact, it means that we have no reason to hold ourselves morally accountable towards future generations. This doesn't mean that we necessarily *will* or must create dire circumstances for future generations, but instead that there is no way in which we can be accountable not to do so within a person-affecting view. The 'Bite the Bullet' theory seems quite dangerous, and leads us no closer to an answer on how to act towards future generations. Instead, it answers my main question of whether we should care about the existence and well-being of future generations simply by saying "no". However, regardless of its potentially dire consequences, it is extremely hard to argue against. It would seem that the Bite the Bullet theory is correct, but still unsatisfying.

⁴⁸ Boonin, *How to Solve the Non-Identity Problem*, 154

2.4) Conclusions

I have in this chapter discussed whether we should understand the non-identity problem through an impersonal view or a person-affecting view. I have argued for the latter, showing that through an impersonal view of ethics, there isn't any non-identity problem in the first place. I have discussed other proposed solutions to the non-identity problem that are usually discussed in the contemporary discussion on the matter, some more convincing than others. I found the butterfly effect objection to be the most convincing one, and I will return to this objection in chapter 6. I have also discussed Boonin's 'Bite the Bullet' theory, that shows us that there is no way we can be held accountable for our actions towards future generations. This can lead to us doing absolutely nothing with regards to reducing emissions and securing a habitable planet for those who will come after us. However, though highly unsatisfying, this theory is difficult to argue with. I will return to the 'Bite the Bullet' theory in chapter 6 as well.

3. Benefiting and Harming in Creating

3.1) *When do we begin to exist?*

Now that we have determined that we should regard the non-identity problem through the person-affecting view given that this is the only place the problem arises, we can move on to question the other two claims that the non-identity problem challenges.

These claims regard firstly whether or not we can be benefited or harmed by being brought into existence, and secondly whether someone has to be worse off in order for that person to be said to have been harmed. In this chapter I will discuss the first of these two, namely whether we can consider it a benefit or a harm that we exist. As we can already see from the preceding discussion and we will notice further on in the discussion, the non-identity problem relies upon a great deal of clarifications, and these clarifications are reliant upon one another. This means that finding a starting point in addressing these problems can be difficult, however I hope the structure I have chosen in order to find some clarity, will be sufficient. There are several underlying assumptions that need to be questioned before we can discuss the main claims I have mentioned. One of the important things that need to be clarified in order to answer the question of whether we can benefit or harm in creating, is the question of *when* we actually begin to exist in the first place. The reason this is important to determine, is because the non-identity problem is relevant to when we come into existence. This is because if we are discussing actions upon which ones existence is affected, we need to know when our existence is determined. In order for us to be clear on what cases can be determined as non-identity cases, and which cases can not, we need to answer the question of when we begin to exist.

The question of when we begin to exist is one that is often discussed in contemporary philosophy. The reason it is discussed to such an extent is that the answer to when we begin to exist may have significant ramifications in some of our decision making regarding the beginnings of life. For instance, it may perhaps affect our decisions regarding if and when we may find abortion permissible. Though this discussion is both very interesting and very important, I will not go too far into this question. Instead, I will claim that *for the sake of this discussion*, I would pinpoint existence to begin at conception. This does not necessarily mean that we gain *personhood* at conception, only that we have in fact come into existence. The reason for claiming this is twofold.

First and foremost, in the moment of conception a genetic map has been formed that will determine a *sufficient* amount of who we are. Meaning that after conception, we could not possibly ever be anyone else than that specific person that we are. This leads to the second reason for pinpointing conception to be the moment of existence, namely that it is practical in determining non-identity cases. The difference between same people and different people choices, lies in the moments before and after conception. This is because once one is conceived, one can only ever be that specific person. For the sake of this discussion then, I find it useful to determine that we begin to exist at conception. We are not necessarily given a complete (or an incomplete for that matter) identity at this time, and we have not necessarily achieved personhood. However, a significant enough amount of who we are going to be has been determined, and therefore the possibility of any other consciousnesses have been eliminated at this point. The claim that our existence begins at conception, without necessarily giving us either an identity or personhood, is going to be the underlying premise for the rest of the discussion.

3.2) *Are we benefited or harmed by existence?*

A great deal of people will intuitively have an opinion of whether they have been harmed or benefited by coming into existence. In this subchapter I will argue for the fact that we are neither harmed or benefited by existence. Instead I will argue that our existence should be considered morally neutral to us. If we were to ask the general population, we would undoubtedly receive varying answers. Many will consider their existence as a benefit, imagining that they won some sort of lottery by being conceived.⁴⁹ On the other hand, others will consider it to have been a harm to them. What is clear, is that we often consider our existence as a benefit or a harm to us by looking at the current states of affairs in our life. We could imagine a mental practice of adding together the sum of good and bad things that have happened to us throughout our lives, and then considering if the good outweighs the bad or not. It would seem as if we are in fact calculating whether our *lives* have been a benefit or a harm to us. Here, I would like to point to a distinction that we must keep clear in our minds, in order for us to have a fruitful discussion regarding the non-identity problem. What I am here discussing is whether our *existence* is a benefit or harm to us, not whether our *lives in their entirety* have been so. If we do not distinguish between the two, we will find that the discussion quickly can become a matter of opinion and all in all quite subjective. More importantly,

⁴⁹Which can actually seem appropriate at times, given the statistical odds that are ultimately stacked against all of us coming into existence in the first place.

the objective with this discussion is the goodness or badness of coming into existence, and not our lives in full. Our lives, I would agree can varyingly be good or bad for us.⁵⁰ What is meant by this is that our lives may very well contain varying degrees of well-being. This means that it is possible for us to make a determination that the summation of the things that have happened to us in our lives, result in a life that has been either good or bad. Instead I suggest that we make a definitive separation between the lives that we have lived, and our *coming into existence*. Can the fact that we came into existence, regardless of the life that results from it really be a benefit or a harm to us?

When we discuss whether an action is good or bad for us, we often go forward by means of comparison. A determination of whether an action is good or bad for us can be done by comparing what our circumstances would be like had said action not taken place at all.

In the case of discussing existence however, we will quickly find that we don't really have a comparison. Let us for the sake of the argument claim that coming into existence, so long as we lead a life worth living, is to be considered a benefit to us. If this is the case, by means of comparison, there must exist an individual who has now been harmed by not coming into existence. Or more moderately, there exists an individual who has been unfortunate to not receive this benefit of existence, and is on balance worse off. This means is that if we can state that an individual is better off now that they have gained or come into existence, there must also by means of comparison exist a hypothetical counterpart that is now on balance worse off by not gaining existence in the first place. Naturally, this doesn't make much sense. There cannot exist something that does not, and will not ever, exist. Given the absurdity of this idea, we will realise that there are no means of comparison. There will never exist an individual that is better off for not ever existing. And vice versa, if we instead determine that it is a harm to us that we have come into existence, there must exist someone that is better off that they never came into existence, and someone who never existed was 'lucky' for never existing.

One thing that becomes evident through this practice of comparison, is that we cannot compare *something* to *nothing*.⁵¹ And that is precisely what we are doing when we attribute goodness or badness to existence. *Something* can be good or bad, but nothing is always just *nothing*. This could

⁵⁰ We may have been born into horrible conditions, or our lives could have been a series of either fortunate or unfortunate events. This is without a doubt the case for some people.

⁵¹ I am here solely speaking on the matter of non-existence that has not been preceded by existence. This means that discussing the non-existence that follows from life, death, in this way will be applicable to a certain extent, but not entirely.

be extended to also show that concepts such as ‘goodness’ or ‘badness’ are comparative in nature.⁵² And these concepts are only something we can attribute after the fact of existence. It is of course possible to work with hypotheticals when we are making comparisons. However, but when the hypothetical scenario also includes something to be non-existent, then the comparison cannot be made. We cannot attribute these concepts to something that never existed in any shape or form. Now, there are certain circumstances in which we seem to hold a common lowest denominator of a life we do not consider worth living. Usually these are forms of existence that are inherently awful, painful and without joy. We would usually consider horrible congenital disabilities that cause excruciating pain to belong to this group. These lives could not exist without this specific disease.⁵³ In these cases, we may be able to determine that non-existence would be better than their existence.

Instead we could consider that so long as it is not the case that we suffer from one of these rare genetic disability, our existence can be considered morally neutral. In the sense that it is neither a benefit or a harm to us that we exist. Rather, our lives can be good or bad for us, but the fact that we came into existence in the first place, is morally neutral. On balance our lives may be good or bad, but our existence can be neither. I will therefore claim that our existence, as we also remember I claim begins at conception, should be considered to be morally neutral to us.

There have been some attempts at avoiding the problem of comparing *something* to *nothing*, and therefore also avoiding a great deal of the problems mentioned in the above paragraph. One philosopher who does not accept this comparison as necessary in order for us to determine the benefit or harm of existence, is Elizabeth Harman. In her article ‘Harming and Benefiting in Creating’, she suggests that we do not need to worry about a hypothetical comparison.⁵⁴ Instead of comparing existence to non-existence, we should compare our (or others’) existence with a basic understanding of a decent existence. She calls this comparison, a comparison to a ‘healthy bodily state’.⁵⁵ Harman claims that we should look into the goodness or badness of existence compared to

⁵² Even though the goal of ethics is to find something that is good or bad in and of itself.

⁵³ This means that this regards their existence, and not their lives. This is because they could never have existed without this disability in the first place. Perhaps in these cases, their existence (and not their lives) could be considered a harm to them. It is important to note that I include this only as a means of a small leeway, for determining what that life would be is again highly subjective, and will depend on the individual. Also, determining what lives are worth living and which ones aren’t is a delicate discussion that can have a major impact on people lives. I will not be going further into that discussion in this thesis.

⁵⁴ Harman, *Can We Harm and Benefit In Creating?*, 96

⁵⁵ Harman, *Can We Harm and Benefit In Creating?*, 96

a *general idea of an average well functioning body*. She holds two crucial claims that serve as the foundation of her argument. Firstly, that an action harms a person: “if that action causes pain, early death, bodily damage or deformity to her, even if she would not have existed if the action had not been performed.”⁵⁶

The second claim is that the reason *not* to harm someone is far greater than the reason to *benefit* others. This gives rise to an asymmetry in how we perceive doing harm and causing benefits. I will discuss this seeming asymmetry in chapter 4.6. Harman rejects the idea that we can only compare states with what would have happened had the action not taken place - in other words that we can only compare a life to non-existence, and therefore really not find any real comparison in the first place. Instead, Harman proposes a different means of comparison, involving a ‘healthy bodily state’. “The objector is mistaken to assume that the only available point of comparison is what things would have been like if an action had not been performed. I propose that for persons, there is a point of comparison that involves a healthy bodily state.”⁵⁷ She also adds that this comparison of a ‘healthy bodily state’ includes a young life that has been genetically determined to be disabled, and that it is therefore harmed by its deformity - even if there was never any other alternative lest the child never exist in the first place. This means that the child is harmed by a condition, without which the child would never be able to exist in the first place.

I find Harman’s first claim at face value to be in many ways quite convincing. This idea of a certain standard we all can compare ourselves to is appealing, and quite a clever way of avoiding the non-identity problem altogether. However, I do have a few objections. Firstly, if anything that falls short of a ‘healthy bodily state’ is considered to be a harm, it could lead to some quite extreme consequences. For instance, if someone is born with atopic eczema, it will cause them some bother in their lives, and in some cases pain. Given modern medicine though, it can be quite a manageable condition, and we can safely assume that most people with eczema will consider their lives well worth living in spite of their condition. The question then remains if a healthy bodily state should be understood as an *ideal* bodily state? The distinction between these two is quite important, and not fully discussed in Harman’s article. From Harman’s suggested comparison, this individual affected with eczema will fall short of the idea of a healthy bodily state, and they are therefore harmed by

⁵⁶ Harman, *Can We Harm and Benefit In Creating?*, 93

⁵⁷ Harman, *Can We Harm and Benefit In Creating?*, 96

coming into existence. In order to avoid that harm, we would have to avoid that that person come into existence in the first place. If we agree to this, that then means that a significant amount of the world's population would be harmed by coming into existence. In order to maintain a charitable reading of Harman's article, I would assume that she is implying conditions that are a great deal more severe than just atopic eczema. Instead I would assume that she is pointing to conditions which would gravely impact one's quality of life, and that would fall quite far short of a healthy bodily state. However, the principle of the criticism in itself holds, for how are we to determine where this limit is drawn? Harman unfortunately doesn't offer an explanation that is precise enough in this circumstance, but perhaps if she did define it in a more precise way, then she would have come a far way in finding a convincing point of comparison to determine when someone is harmed or not by existence.

The second objection I have to her proposition, is that our definition of 'healthy bodily state', will necessarily change. The further advanced medicine becomes, the more illnesses we cure and the longer we live - the more our definition of a 'healthy bodily state' will *change*. The idea we hold of a 'healthy bodily state' today, is naturally very different now from what it was 400 years ago. The problem then will be, even if she does more precisely spell out *what* the definition of a healthy bodily state is, is to *which* standard we should actually hold future individuals against. Should we make decisions based on what we would *today* consider to be a healthy bodily state? Or should we make decisions based on what we presume will be the average lifespan and general public health level in 100 years? This is also applicable to distance in space; should we base on the standards we hold in the richer countries in western Europe, or poorer countries in for instance Africa? At this current time, we are already representing a big difference in standards for what is a healthy standard of living, leading to different standards in what should be regarded as a healthy bodily state.

I would also suggest that Harman could add an extension to her view on a healthy bodily state, so it also includes our mental states. Harman doesn't specifically mention it in her article, so it is possible that she already believes this to be included. Many serious psychological illnesses can be passed on genetically, such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder or a predisposition towards depression. These can have a severe impact on our lives. As well as this, an argument can be made for the fact that currently, our physical health is generally quite high. However, when it comes to psychological wellbeing, the trend is quite the opposite. The current younger generation reports

higher levels of stress, anxiety and depression than previously measured in any generation.⁵⁸ If we extend the idea of a healthy bodily state to include our mental well-being⁵⁹, then we are perhaps further towards a way of working around the non-identity problem.

3.3) *Existence is morally neutral*

In the previous section, I defended the claim that existence is morally neutral. This means that it cannot possibly be neither a benefit, nor a harm to us that we did in fact begin to exist. This claim includes, however, only the fact that we exist, not the entirety of the lives we lead *after* we have come into existence. Given my previous claims, this would mean that anything that happens after conception can be considered either a benefit or a harm to us, *but the fact that we were conceived in the first place*, cannot. This will have different implications for the way we regard future generations and their harm or benefit in coming into existence. It may perhaps be the case that future generations will lead miserable lives, but it would seem that there is no way we can say that they have been harmed by coming into existence.

That being said, it has been argued that there exist a few cases in which we may consider the mere fact of coming into existence to be a harm to us. As I mentioned earlier, there seems to be a lowest common denominator to which certain cases will be considered to be a life not worth living. Even if we agree that existence is morally neutral, it perhaps may be possible to make some exceptions to this determination. I also discussed that what a life not worth living would consist in, would be terribly difficult to pinpoint exactly given how this boils down to individual and subjective perceptions. Usually we use an example lives that would be affected by a congenital disability that is indistinguishable from the individual. However, we also need to keep in mind that our idea of a life worth living or not, does not necessarily hinge on our coming into existence. Some people will be so unfortunate as to develop illnesses, or suffer horrible accidents later on in life, leaving them to live lives other people may define as not worth living. This does not mean that these individuals coming into being constitutes a harm or a benefit to them. We must also accept a level of uncertainty given that we cannot really determine what a happy person will be or not. Since we

⁵⁸ www.bigthink.com, “Millenials Are at Higher Risk for Mental Health Issues. This may be why.”

⁵⁹ I will note that given a charitable reading of Harman, she never excludes mental well-being, and perhaps she presumes that this is already included in her term of a ‘healthy bodily state’. However, Harman clarifies that she purposely leaves the definition vague. Harman, *Can We Harm and Benefit In Creating?*, 97

cannot beforehand determine whether some congenital disability will create a life not worth living for that specific individual, we cannot determine whether it is a benefit or a harm to them that they exist.

Since we seem to lack a means of comparison, something that also creates the non-identity problem in the first place, perhaps a solution would be to question the terms ‘better off’ and ‘worse off’. If we redefine the way we consider a harm (such as Elizabeth Harman has done in the foregoing subchapter), we may find a way to hold us morally accountable for the potential dire circumstances future generations may find themselves in in the future. In the next chapter I will discuss whether we can have an account of benefit and harm that does not involve the concepts ‘better off’ or ‘worse off’. This will shed some more light on the case of whether future generations can truly be benefited or harmed by our actions.⁶⁰

3.4) *Morally neutral for others*

So far in this chapter I have concluded that existence (taking place at the time of conception) should be considered morally neutral. There is another objection to the idea that existence is morally neutral that I find appealing, and that is the objection presented by John Broome. He claims that whilst we may conclude that existence is morally neutral, this is a claim that is, in fact, false. The reason for this is whilst it may be neutral for the individual in themselves, whether they exist or not, it will not be neutral for the *rest of the world*. In his book *Weighing Lives*, Broome counters the idea

⁶⁰ I will briefly mention the idea of anti-natalism, and clarify that this is not the idea I am endorsing. anti-natalism is the idea that we are in fact always harmed by coming into existence, and that we therefore have a moral obligation to not create more life. One philosopher who is adamant that existence is a harm to us, is David Benatar. In his book *Better Never to Have Been*, he argues for the view that existence is such a harm to us that we in fact have a moral obligation to not continue to procreate. Instead, he suggests that we draw the line here, and collectively decide that we should no longer continue the human race. This is an interesting view, but not the one that I am putting forward in my own argumentation in this thesis. I have determined that existence should be considered to be morally neutral, therefore it is just that - neutral, not a harm to us. An anti-natalist will not agree on the premise that existence is neutral, and instead point to the fact that it is always a harm to us. Even though we claim that existence is morally neutral, this does not necessarily speak to the value we attribute to a life after it has come into existence, or our opinions of the continuation of the human race. Believing that human existence is morally neutral does not necessarily put the continuation of our species existence under question. I find this necessary to clarify, given that many people fear that claiming that existence is morally neutral means that we have no positive reasons for procreating, and that we therefore shouldn't. This is not what I am claiming, I am instead suggesting that coming into existence is not a matter of morality in the first place. Instead we could use other reasons to defend our choice to either choose to procreate or refrain from it.

by claiming that contrary to what some philosophers may argue, existence can in fact be morally good or bad, and existence can be considered both a benefit or a harm to us. The reason he gives for this is that regardless of whether you consider *your own* existence to be either a benefit or harm, or morally neutral for that matter, it will never be morally neutral to *others*. He claims that, if we remind ourselves of how intertwined human lives are with one another, we will see that our lives and our *existence* does not exist in a vacuum. Simply put, our existence affects other people's existence, either in a good or a bad way. Given some kind of calculation, we will see that our lives will on balance as well as the mere fact that we exist have been morally good or morally bad in our societies or in the world as a whole, for that matter.

We must recognise from the start that a person's existence may have either good or bad effects on other people. For example a new person will make demands on the earth's resources, and that will probably be bad for the rest of us. On the other hand, she will bring to the world her energy, talents, strengths and abilities, and those will do us good. The intuition is that a person's existence is neutral in itself, setting aside its effects on other people.⁶¹

Broome does have a compelling argument here; lives could maybe be morally neutral in themselves for that own specific individual, but may have an effect on others. Consider for example the negative effect of one single life, such as Stalin, and how different the world may have looked without that life entering into existence at all. However, from a pragmatic point of view, this effect will be near impossible to predict. In certain circumstances we can be able to tell that one individual might be born with great need of medical attention, and in that case will be a burden and drain many resources. However, we cannot possibly know if this individual's strength, talents or abilities will outweigh their financial burden and potential emotional strain. To use a specific example of this, measured in resources demanded and the cases of congenital illnesses, Stephen Hawking would not be considered to have a beneficial effect on our society or economy. But as the circumstances have been, he was invaluable to our society.⁶² This brings me to a point I will come back to later, about the asymmetry of harm. If we consider that with regards to predictable pains, (if we had a test that could determine a specific gene defect that causes ALS before birth) we could have easily predicted that his life would entail a great deal of personal suffering, and that he would maybe have a worse

⁶¹ Broome, *Weighing Lives*, 144

⁶² Please note, I am not here stating that if one is affected by a serious illness, or suffers some kind of accident, that one is required to justify ones societal value by compensating in other areas of life. This example can seem cynical, but I am not suggesting we should start placing value on people in such a trivial way.

effect on society. But, given how unpredictable life is, these things are impossible to predict beforehand, and are all in all quite impractical.

What does this then mean for future generations and climate change? Broome's argument is quite compelling, and by no means is it wrong. Following this kind of process would actually potentially lead to quite good results for future generations. If we consider the benefit of adding a life to an already overpopulated planet, we might be able to hinder such dire living situations for future generations. However, Broome's theory takes place within an impersonal view of ethics. Though highly practical and pragmatic for determining how to act towards future generations, it is still not going to give us an answer to the non-identity problem.

In retrospect, we may be able to 'weigh lives' in such fashion, and claim that some lives were more morally acceptable to bring forth than others. This means that we perhaps could in hindsight agree that some lives have a morally beneficial or harmful effect on others. I agree with Broome's claim that our lives are not morally neutral to others, but I would here again like to bring to light the distinction I made earlier. That distinction is between our lives on the whole, and *the fact that we exist*. Earlier in this thesis, I discussed how our genetic map is created at conception, and that at this point in time, any other possibility of who could have come into existence was eliminated - there was only this possible consciousness. However, this did not mean that this map determined in any significant way how that consciousness would behave, or what that consciousness would be in the future. Given this, we can in fact say that someone's life has been a benefit or a harm to the world given the way in which that individual chose to behave. If it is the case that we conclude that an individual's life has been harmful to others, and therefore a harm to the world, we can still state that they began to exist is still morally neutral. Therefore, Broome's argument will not challenge the fact that it is morally neutral for us to ourselves that we exist.

Moreover, I am not sure how Broome's argument against the neutrality of existence will help us in regard to how we should act towards future generations. Certainly, it is problematic with respect to attempting to solve the non-identity problem, as it does not address the main circumstances of the problem. However, I would agree that there are certain circumstances in which Broome's argument can become necessary in intergenerational ethics, and this is when we are discussing Different

Number Choices.⁶³ In these cases, we can discuss the burden vs. benefit of having the addition of one more existence, with regards to basic resources. Further than this simpler question (though admittedly sometimes important to address), Broome's argument cannot help us in getting closer to answering the question of why we should care about the existence and well-being of future generations.

3.6) Asymmetries in harming and benefiting

As I have mentioned a couple of times throughout the discussion so far, there seems to be an imbalance in the way in which we regard benefit and harm. There exist examples of lives that we determine to be not worth living. We can imagine a sort of common denominator in which most people agree that a life below this level constitutes a life not worth living. An extension of this kind of thinking, would be the idea that the fact that they exist, is actually to be considered a harm to them. This would naturally be cases involving severe congenital disabilities that will cause a life that was filled with suffering without any possible, or periodical, relief. Given that the disability is genetic, this will mean that the disability is inherent to the individual that has come into existence, and the person and the disability cannot be distinguished from one another. Therefore, this individuals existence in and of itself should be considered a harm to them, and that we in fact have a moral responsibility to *avoid* bringing such a life into existence. In the first chapter, I mentioned cases of 'wrongful lives claims'. These cases involve claims of which a child has a so-called 'wrongful life' and that they have been harmed by being brought into existence. If we agree to this claim, then there must presumably exist an equivalent higher threshold, on which if we know an existence is going to be fantastic, then we have a moral obligation to bring that life into existence. Often, we find ourselves agreeing to the first claim, whilst disagreeing with the second claim. If this is the case, then we find ourselves with an asymmetry between the two.

In her discussion on harm, Harman focuses on two different parts of the discussion. The first is the one discussed in chapter 3.2 about the case of a 'healthy bodily state'. The second part of Harman's claim, regards what we term the Asymmetry of Harm. Some philosophers, such as Harman, have argued that we have a moral obligation to not create lives we know are going to be miserable, but

⁶³ See figure on page 18.

there seems to be no equivalent moral obligation to create lives we know are going to be very *good*. There is therefore an asymmetry between the two obligations here. Harman joins herself to the following premise: “There are reasons in favour of a course of action in virtue of the benefits to the future individuals who will not exist if the course of action is not taken”⁶⁴ If we conclude that existence is morally neutral, such as I have, we cannot subscribe to the idea of a lowest common denominator in which there are cases where we are morally obliged to avoid creating life because of the immense amount of suffering and pain that this existence will bring with it. However, we might attempt to make an exception in extreme cases. What these specific cases would be, is hard to pinpoint. As I have also mentioned previously, this is completely subjective. We may hear about a case in which we consider the suffering individual to lead a life that is not worth living, but if we ask the individual themselves, they might claim that their life is to them in fact, worth living. Though the idea of a life worth living is subjective, there will, at some point be a case where we can all agree that there is too much pain for it to be worth living.⁶⁵ In other words, we have a lower threshold, but there is no symmetrical higher threshold. Meaning, if we can predict that a life will be incredibly happy and filled with joy, we are still under no moral obligation to create it. John Broome quotes Jan Narveson on the matter: “We are in favour about making people happy, but neutral about making happy people.”⁶⁶

Ben Bradley is a philosopher who discusses the asymmetry of harm in his article ‘Asymmetries in Benefiting, Harming and Creating’.⁶⁷ He disagrees with the idea that there exists an asymmetry between benefit and harm. He begins with addressing the intuition that is at the basis of the asymmetry: “Sometimes goodness fails to provide compelling reasons for action while badness does provide compelling reasons in situations that are otherwise similar.”⁶⁸ He agrees that there perhaps lies an asymmetry in creating due to in one case a pregnancy and upbringing must be involved, in the other case it doesn’t. What is meant by this is that if we are in favour of not making

⁶⁴ Harman, *Can We Harm and Benefit In Creating?*, 98

⁶⁵ Sometimes it’s not just about pain. With the Zika virus ravaging South America, infected pregnant women are giving birth to children that are born with only a brainstem, meaning a severe reduction in cognitive abilities, and potential to develop this at any later point. These children will in all likelihood never have a consciousness to perceive their life to be either worth or not worth living. These children exist mostly to the joy of their parents, and not necessarily in their own rights.

⁶⁶ Broome, *Should We Value Population?*, 401

⁶⁷ Bradley, *Asymmetries in Benefiting, Harming and Creating*

⁶⁸ Bradley, *Asymmetries in Benefiting, Harming and Creating*, 37

unhappy people, we must then be in favour of making happy people. However even if the child is happy, there is still a significant burden on the parents that needs to take place in order to bring this life forward. Creating a happy person involves other people, whilst not creating unhappy people, does not affect others in the same way. I find this argument quite compelling, perhaps there lies an asymmetry here not between benefit and harm. Instead, the asymmetry may lie in the difference of not bringing into existence a life that is otherwise wanted, in hopes of sparing enormous amounts of pain and suffering, in contrast to bringing to existence a life not otherwise wanted, bringing with it the burdens and responsibilities that come along with it. Maybe if we could bring into existence lives without pregnancies or with complete separation to parental duties, perhaps this asymmetry could solve itself. Since this is not currently the case however, it seems there still lies an asymmetry in the matter.

Harman addresses the asymmetry between benefiting and harming more directly, and has stated that there is a stronger reason-giving force behind preventing harms, then there is behind producing benefits.

Or perhaps the asymmetry is less broad. Perhaps when an already existing person's welfare is at stake, benefits and harms are equally important, but when it's still up for grabs whether a person will exist or not, it is more important not to harm this as-yet merely potential person than to benefit her. We have a strong obligation to make people happy and not make people unhappy, and we have a strong obligation not to make unhappy people, but we do not have a strong obligation to make happy people.⁶⁹

Bradley argues that there is no asymmetry in terms of well-being⁷⁰, what he means by this is not that there is an upper threshold to what lives we are obligated to bring into existence, but rather that we do not have a lower threshold for what lives are morally unacceptable for us to bring into existence. He holds the view that one can never be harmed by coming into existence. One other way of addressing the way the asymmetry is formed, in regards to the people that will necessarily exist up against those who will not necessarily exist. Necessitarianism, mentioned by the philosopher Algander⁷¹, is a view that the only well-being that is relevant to us when determining what we ought to do, is the well-being of "necessary people", or people whose existence is not contingent on the outcome of the action. This is a way of addressing the way in which the asymmetry is formed, by

⁶⁹ Bradley, *Asymmetries in Benefiting, Harming and Creating*, 39

⁷⁰ There might possibly be in terms of rights he says, but doesn't address this further

⁷¹ Algander, *Harm, Benefit & Non-Identity*, 146

comparing those people that will necessarily exist, and those who will not necessarily exist. What this means is that we must discover whether the asymmetry lies within the asymmetry in existence and non-existence, or whether it lies within the asymmetry in benefiting and harming in general. Bradley also suggests that we may need to look into more general asymmetries between benefit and harm, rather than at existence and non-existence. There is a more moderate view that he finds more agreeable, stating that we have much more reason to bring about happy people than we do to bring about mildly happy people. But, we have the absolute most reason to *not* bring about an *unhappy* person.⁷² “Positive and negative well-being are symmetrical with respect to their impact on an individual’s well-being level; they are asymmetrical both respect to their reason-giving force”⁷³

Whilst this can sound convincing, there still seems to be one large problem. If we have the option to take an action that will cause us a surplus of a major amount of well-being at the cost of a little reduction in well-being, it would seem we are morally required not to take that action. This as a result of negative well-being weighing much heavier than the positive well-being. Perhaps, Bradley considers, there may be a difference between the actions we do towards ourselves and others, given we often must ask before causing negative well-being, but often are not required to ask to cause positive well-being. However, the asymmetry will appear to be equally as absurd. “I propose that well-being is not an intrinsic property an individual has, nor a relation an individual has to something else in the world, but rather a *relation between individuals and worlds* (and times), that can be represented as a function from individuals and worlds to numbers.”⁷⁴

Though Bradley disagrees with the idea of an asymmetry, claiming that we have the same moral obligation to create very happy people as we have to not create unhappy people. However, I do not think that this necessarily has to be the conclusion. If there exists an asymmetry, this simply means that we have an equal moral responsibility, meaning that we could equally have no responsibility. The conclusion of Bradley’s reasoning could just as easily mean that we have no moral responsibility to not create unhappy lives.

⁷²Bradley, *Asymmetries in Benefiting, Harming and Creating*, 43

⁷³ Bradley, *Asymmetries in Benefiting, Harming and Creating*, 43

⁷⁴ Bradley, *Asymmetries in Benefiting, Harming and Creating*, 47

I would also mention that it seems that part of the problem of the asymmetry of harm with regards to currently non-existing people, is that there is a great deal of *uncertainty* surrounding them. We can easily say that we are not in favour of making happy people, because we do not see it as morally wrong for someone with the potential to create a happy life not to create that life. But one cannot possibly predict this beforehand. All the foundations may be in place for a happy life, but this does not mean that that life will *actually* be happy. However, when it comes to a miserable life, there are certain congenital disabilities from which we can determine with much more precision and certainty before the individual is born, that they will lead an unhappy life, or a 'life not worth living'. This means that we often can agree on a lowest common denominator of what a miserable life consists in, but finding an agreeable equivalent higher threshold of what an amazing life consists in, is much more difficult and subjective. There can be a common consensus of what ultimate pain and suffering would look like, but the counterpart to this kind of life is not as easy to agree on. I would here like to suppose that in part, one of the reasons the asymmetry exists is also because of the level of uncertainty and subjectiveness that surrounds the concept of both 'happiness' and 'live worth living'.

Given the arguments I have presented in this subchapter, I would agree with the claim that there exists an asymmetry in harming and benefiting. As I have pointed out, this is due to several different factors such as uncertainty, and the consensus of what pain and suffering is. I do not, however, determine that this needs to be very problematic with regards to future generations. The development in climate change has now reached a point where we are no longer discussing the creation of benefits. Instead, what we are really facing is a question of avoidance of harm. We can state that we are more morally required to make sure that there is a sustainable planet on which future generations can avoid sufferance and lead decent lives, than we are to produce a surplus amount of benefits to make certain that they lead lives that we would consider to be better than our own. This is important to establish, since we now have to try a different approach in order to answer the question of whether we should care about the existence and well-being of future generations.

With regards to climate change, such an asymmetry will not make a practical difference. Our idea of avoiding harm being more important than causing benefits, will be just as helpful towards future generations. This is especially true given the fact that our main problem regards the release of emissions which is *causing* a major *harm*. Therefore when discussing the avoidance of causing

harm, that will cover most of the problems that the non-identity problem is causing with regards to future generations and climate change.

3.6) Conclusions

In this chapter, I have discussed whether the fact that we exist is morally good, or bad. In light of this, we also had to discuss when we in fact begin to exist. I have concluded that we begin to exist at conception. This is because at conception our genetic code is formed, something that leads to the determination of a significant amount of who we are and who we are going to be having been decided. I have also concluded that given the lack of possible comparison, we cannot state that it is either morally good or morally bad for us to exist, and hence it must be morally neutral. Our existence may indeed have a morally good or morally bad effect on the rest of the world, such as Broome suggests, but this is not really relevant to the non-identity problem in and of itself. The non-identity problem addresses whether it is considered a benefit or a harm to us individually that we exist or not, not the moral effect of our lives on the rest of the world. We have looked at the asymmetry of harm, and I have discussed both the asymmetry in existent life up against non-existent life, as well as the asymmetry in the concepts of benefit and harm in the first place. I have concluded that there exists an asymmetry between both whether within the concepts, or within the difference of existent and non-existent people. However, this asymmetry needn't be damning for us in an attempt to find an answer to if we should care about future people or not. In concluding that existence is morally neutral to us, we have come one step further in answering the question of whether we should care about the existence and well-being of future generations. I have attempted to look into a way of solving the non-identity problem in order to secure the existence and well-being of future generations. Here we find that the non-identity problem cannot be solved through our understanding of benefiting or harming in creating. Therefore we need a next step, and a new approach in which we can possibly solve the non-identity problem and therefore answer the main question in this thesis.

4. When are we Harmed?

In the previous discussion we have seen that the non-identity problem in part results from the intuition that one needs to be worse off because of an action in order for that action to have harmed us. because of an action in order for us to claim that it has in fact harmed us. One attempt at solving the non-identity problem can be possibly be found in a change of this premise. As I have mentioned earlier, this chapter is dedicated to addressing the intuition that one must be worse off in order to be harmed, or vice versa, one must be better off because of an action to be able to say that said action was a benefit. As we see from the previous chapter, what we are missing is an inquiry into how we should understand the concepts of benefit and harm. One reason why the non-identity problem represents such a great challenge, is because we understand harm as being something resulting in somebody being worse off in some respect. In the previous chapter, I concluded that this is not possible given there is no ‘somebody’ that is worse or better off. Another approach to solving the non-identity problem would instead be to argue that somebody can be harmed without being worse off.

4.1) *Definition of Harm*

In order for us to be able to answer the question of when we are harmed and not, we need to begin with a definition of harm. In his dissertation ‘Harm, Benefit and the Non Identity Problem’, Algander has endeavoured to provide a deep analysis of what harm really consists in, and when we can say that someone has been harmed, especially with regards to the non-identity problem. If we look to the non-identity case of ‘the 14 year old girl’ that I laid out in the first chapter, Algander points to the common sense reasoning that leads to a number of considerations. Among others, we find an important normative principle on which the case (and other non-identity cases) relies, namely that of the Harm Principle⁷⁵. “The Harm Principle: If an act would harm someone then this is a reason against performing that act.”⁷⁶ This principle states that the fact that an action is harmful, will give us reason to refrain from doing said act. Given this Harm Principle, if our actions were to harm another individual, we should in general refrain from performing them. If we can establish that an action that will cause harm to another individual is one we should refrain from doing, then

⁷⁵ This principle should not be mistaken for Mill’s Harm Principle, which is quite different.

⁷⁶ Algander, *Harm, Benefit & Non-Identity*, 14

we must further establish what causing harm actually consists in. With regards to the Harm Principle, we usually consider actions that cause someone to be worse off to be harmful. More specifically, Algander outlines what he calls the Counterfactual Condition to the Harm Principle. “The Counterfactual Condition: An act harms a person if and only if that person is worse off than she or he would have been had the action not been performed.”⁷⁷ This seems at first glance to be a good starting point in determining when we can be said to have been harmed, using both the counterfactual condition and the harm principle together, the concept of being ‘worse off’ also allows for certain harms to be done towards someone, whilst still being in alignment with their best interest. For instance, a surgeon amputating a patient’s arm, is harming his patient. If he is however amputating the arm to save the patient’s life, he is not harming the patient. This is because, on a whole, the patient will be better - off (i.e., they will continue living) due to the actions taken by the surgeon. However, as we can probably immediately recognise in this Counterfactual Condition, we will have problems with regards to the non-identity problem. This counterfactual condition seems to be able to work quite well in cases regarding already existing individuals, and generally any case where the individuals existence is not contingent upon the action. However, it becomes quite problematic when the individuals that are concerned will come into existence at different times, perhaps so far apart in time that the individuals will never exist at the same time at all. Amongst currently living people, the ‘worse off’ principle seems to work quite well. However, we cannot have one definition of harm towards currently living people, and one towards future potential people. If we have been able to find a true definition of harm, it should not only be applicable to same people choices, but also be relevant to both Same Number Choices, and Different Number Choices⁷⁸. As Algander himself states:

However, restricting the principle on this way to same-people cases seems ad hoc. If harm is relevant at all then one would expect that the Harm Principle could explain what we ought to do in all kinds of cases, not just Same People Cases. What we are looking for is not one set of principles for Same People Cases and another set of principles for Same Number Cases.⁷⁹

As I have previously established, we are neither benefited nor harmed by coming into existence, so how can someone who does not exist be worse off, and therefore harmed, as a result of our actions? If someone is not worse off because of an action (because if it were not for that action they would

⁷⁷ Algander, *Harm, Benefit & Non-Identity*, 14

⁷⁸ See figure on page 4.

⁷⁹ Algander, *Harm, Benefit & Non-Identity*, 17

not exist) we cannot then appeal to the Harm Principle in order to explain why they have been harmed. If we then lose the Harm Principle, we also lose our ability to find some kind of reason for to refrain from harmful actions towards future generations. It would seem that in order to maintain a sense of accountability, we must either find an alternative to the Counterfactual Condition, in which we establish that someone can be harmed without being worse off, or we need to find a way in which to state that someone is worse off by an action - even if said action is existence inducing. There are also, however, other alternatives to this in which we needn't appeal to the Harm Principle in the first place. This view is termed the No Difference View. Parfit describes an example consisting of two medical programs. This example is similar to the example of Bettie and Wilma⁸⁰ which was previously laid out, but there are some differences as they are used to illustrate different points.

The Medical Programmes. There are two rare conditions, J and K, which cannot be detected without special tests. If a pregnant woman had Condition J, this will cause the child she is carrying to have a certain handicap. A simple treatment would prevent this effect. If a woman has Condition K when she conceives a child, this will cause this child to have the same particular handicap. Condition K cannot be treated, but always disappears within two months. Suppose next that we have the same particular handicap. Condition K cannot be treated, but always disappears within two months. Suppose next that we have planned two medical programmes, but there are funds for only one; so one must be cancelled. In the first programme, millions of women would be tested during pregnancy. Those found to have Condition J would be treated. In the second programme, millions of women would be tested when they intend to try to become pregnant. Those found to have Condition K would be warned to postpone conception for at least two months, after which this incurable condition will have disappeared. Suppose finally that we can predict that these two programmes would achieve results in as many cases. If there is Pregnancy Testing, 1,000 children a year will be born normal rather than handicapped. If there is Preconception Testing, there will each year be born 1,000 normal children rather than 1000, different, handicapped children.⁸¹

What this example illustrates, is the difference between Same People Choices and Different People Choices. If one regards, as Parfit does, that there is no significant difference between the two medical programmes, then one is a holder of the No Difference View, and also then, the impersonal view of ethics. As we may remember from the second chapter, the holder of the impersonal view of ethics, does not believe that a specific someone needs to be worse off in order to have been harmed. This means that it is irrelevant whether the child was already conceived or not, the outcome of

⁸⁰ Presented on page 34

⁸¹ Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, 367

1,000 healthy children rather than 1,000 disabled children is still the same in both programmes.⁸² Since the outcome is seemingly the same in both programmes, it can perhaps be tempting to concede to the No Difference View. However, through some other examples we might see that the No Difference view gives solutions that can seem counterintuitive, or at least lack to see the difference between cases we intuitively find quite different. An example of this is through the difference between life-extension and life-addition, also formulated by Parfit. Algander rephrases the formulation as follows:

“Suppose we choose between implementing two policies; *extension* or *addition*. If extension is implemented, a number of people who would live for 40 years would live for 80 years instead. If addition is implemented, on an equal number of people, who would not exist if Extension is implemented, would exist and live for 40 years.”⁸³

Many find that there is an intuitive difference between these cases, perhaps because we give more value to life that already exists rather than life that does not yet exist. There is in principle no real difference between this case and the former example of the two medical programmes. However, we might find ourselves objecting more to the case of life extension/ addition. This is purely because of our psychology, in which there is a greater distance between someone having lived for forty years, and someone who has not yet been born, than there is between two individuals of which neither have been born. I would like to point out that the difference could also be because of the value we attribute to a life that has unfolded, that is, that we value more the continuation of a life that has already existed for 40 years than something which has come into existence only a few days ago⁸⁴. Also, we can easily see that the No Difference View belongs to the realm of impersonal ethics, in which a harm needn't belong to a specific individual. I have previously argued that the non-identity problem only makes sense to discuss within a person-affecting view. Therefore, this No Difference

⁸² I would note here that a lot of the time these examples can seem unrealistic and very abstract, however a similar example to that of the two medical programmes happened recently in the midst of the Zika outbreak. The World Health Organisation recommended that women who had been living in areas heavily affected from the outbreak should avoid becoming pregnant for the next five years, in order to avoid conceiving children that will suffer from serious disabilities. Women who were afflicted during pregnancy were given a form of medication in which it is uncertain what the success rate was. Luckily, the WHO had the ability to run both of the medical programmes at the same time, Programme B presumably being the most successful one (although only time will tell this).

⁸³ Algander, *Harm, Benefit & Non-Identity*, 19

⁸⁴ The discussion of at what age one's life is most meaningful and when it is best or worst for us (if we can be worse or better off in the first place) to die, is very interesting. Our own intuitions on this may be affecting our feeling of the difference between these two cases even though, as I mentioned earlier, they are on principle the same. I will bring this line of thought any further however, since it would be on the side of the question I am attempting to answer

View doesn't solve the non-identity problem, instead the non-identity problem does not show up in the first place. Given that there is no solution within a person-affecting view, Algander shows that the most plausible way of trying to solve the non-identity problem is to consider the Counterfactual Condition and whether it is a plausible account of harm in the first place.

4.2) *Can you be harmed without being worse off?*

In the previous subchapter, I discussed what it means to be harmed. Algander begins with the Harm Principle, which is supposed to serve as the normative principle upon which we intuitively believe we should act when someone could potentially be harmed by those actions. Along with this he presents the counterfactual condition, that tells us that one must be *worse off* in order to be said to have been harmed. If we believe that identity doesn't matter in making these moral choices, then this needn't be a concern for us, but neither then, does the non- identity problem in general. As a result of this, it seems that we are left with two options. Either we must determine that there are a different set of rules for currently existing people and contingent people, or we have to alter the counterfactual condition in itself. The former seems like the least viable option. Given this, we are left with only the one option, namely looking for a different account of harm, meaning a different formulation of the counterfactual condition.

There are several ways we can attempt at finding a way to say someone has been harmed without being worse off, whilst working within a person-affecting view. As I have mentioned earlier, having a certain set of rules for currently existing people and a different one for potential people is not what we are looking for in a complete definition of harm. We are instead looking for a general rule that can be applicable in all situations. Therefore, our only other option seems to be that we need to adjust the harm principle so that it is applicable to future generations, without also having to face the non-identity problem. Harman suggested that future generations can be said to be worse off - in comparison with a healthy bodily state, a suggestion that both has its merits and some quite problematic aspects. The fact that we cannot be worse off for being alive is something that lies at the centre of the non-identity problem. If we can eliminate the concept of worse off, we can also eliminate the non-identity problem.

In what follows, I will consider some attempts to show that someone can be harmed without being made worse off, and I will argue that none of them succeeds. Instead, it seems that the only way that

we can actually achieve such an explanation is through creating a new counterfactual condition to account for when we are actually being harmed. There is one suggestion by Elisabeth Harman, that is in many ways quite convincing. This suggestion seems to show us a way we can get around the idea of being worse off being attached to harm. She points out that there is one intuition at the core of the non-identity problem that has not of yet been sufficiently discussed. This intuition regards how we understand regret and the causality of events, she calls this the ‘No Regret Argument’:

“The No Regret Argument: The people affected by the policy do not (nor should they) regret that it was adopted. So they are not harmed by the policy and there is no reason against it in virtue of its effects on them.”⁸⁵

Harman here points to the fact that it is not necessarily the case that when we are regretting circumstances that our existence is contingent upon, that this also means that we by default must also regret our own existence. We intuitively, and also reasonably, believe that if we are to wish away an event or action on which our lives depend on having taken place, we must also wish away every single event or action that took place as a result of the regretted action. In order to regret something, we must also regret the things that resulted from it. Harman explains as follows: “The objector asserts that, in order to have a legitimate complaint with an action, its victim must prefer the world *as it would have been had the action not been performed* to the world *as it actually is*.”⁸⁶

This goes to the heart of the non-identity problem. Harman goes on to show that there are circumstances in which you wouldn't wish away the life you now have, but still regret the actions that may have brought you to lead this life that you are now happy with. These examples are few and far between, but they exist nonetheless. And all that is needed for her objection to be legitimate is that these examples do, occasionally occur. One of the examples she gives is that of the Nazi Prisoner.

“Nazi Prisoner: A man was imprisoned in a Nazi concentration camp, where he suffered many harms. But his experience in the camp enriched his character and deepened his understanding of life, such that overall his life was better than it would have been had he not been imprisoned in the camp. He does not wish that the Nazis had not imprisoned him, because he so values what he has gained from the experience.”⁸⁷

⁸⁵ Harman, *Can We Harm and Benefit In Creating?*, 98

⁸⁶ Harman, *Can We Harm and Benefit In Creating?*, 99

⁸⁷ ‘Harman, *Can We Harm and Benefit In Creating?*, 99

This is an example of someone who has without a doubt been harmed, but still has ended up *better* off in the end because of the actions. It is important to note that this does not however, follow the same reasoning as a surgeon who ‘harms’ a patient by amputating their arm - when the amputation will save the patient’s life. The difference here is that the harm that was committed, was not made with the *intention* to either save or better someone’s life. Rather, the intent was bad, but the result in the long term, was good. We can therefore still hold that the Nazi’s have severely harmed this individual, whilst him still not wishing away that which was resulting from the harm. His resulting benefit does not in any way excuse or de-legitimate the harm that has actually occurred, the harm still stands in its own right, Harman claims. This means that the Nazi prisoner has been harmed, but without being worse off as a result of the harm. An important aspect of this is that, as I would like to assume that Harman is implying here, it must have been intentional that the harm was caused. More precisely put, it cannot have been intentional that one was supposed to be *better off* because of an action, but instead the intention was for one to be *worse off*. This clause is necessary, for without it we could legitimately then claim that a surgeon is harming her patients if she amputates the patients arm to save the patients life. This is however tricky to determine, this No Regret view must imply cases in which one is worse off for a certain period in time, with some kind of benefit arising after the fact. Perhaps with the benefit not being intended or guaranteed to be gained in the first place. Only then could this No Regret view make sense without also delegitimising the Harm Principle.

The other interesting point with Harman’s argument is the fact that this doesn’t just show that the worse off definition of harm isn’t sufficient in non-identity cases, but that it actually is seemingly insufficient in cases regarding currently existing people as well. “It might have seemed the worse-off claim only fails in non identity cases, where an action affects whether the harmed persons exists. These cases show that the Worse Off claim fails even when restricted to cases where the harmed person exists independently of the action.”⁸⁸ If we agree with Harman’s objection to the No Regret View, then she will have successfully proven that the Counterfactual Condition is flawed, not only in light of the non-identity problem (and therefore causing the problem) but rather that it is flawed in and of itself, and must be changed either way. There are many convincing elements to Harman’s argument, but there is one main reason that I do not find it convincing enough. That is the question of when it comes to the case of the currently existing people and the No Regret View (meaning cases in which no one’s identity was contingent upon the regrettable action), we cannot know what

⁸⁸ Harman, *Can We Harm and Benefit In Creating?*, 100

consequences we can actually attribute to the harm that has been done. There are two separate reasons here. Firstly, we cannot know for certain that the insights that the Nazi prisoner has achieved after the harm are necessarily *contingent* upon the harm. These insights could perhaps have come from just listening to another tell stories about their experience within the camps, or possibly through other non-harmful experiences. This might be put a bit bluntly, but nevertheless, the benefits that the former Nazi Prisoner has received are not for certain contingent upon the harm. Harman needs but one example of a clear case in which we are certain that the benefit is reliant upon the specific harm to defend her point. One could question whether the benefit could have come about without the harm taking place as well. If it were the case that a benefit could be proven to be contingent upon the harm, the benefit must also not have been able to be accessible through other means.

The second objection I have regards the idea of continuity with regards to being worse off. Is it the case that one must be worse off for the rest of one's life in order to have been harmed? If one has been

in a moment, a day or a year because of a harm, the fact that one is in a better place many years later does not take away from the legitimacy of that harm. If this is the case, it would seem there would hardly be any cases that would in fact count as being harmful. One would then have to carry the harm throughout ones life and always, on balance, be worse off. It would seem it would have to be very clear that the benefits were as a result of a harm in order for this argument to work, but that is in most cases extremely difficult to pinpoint. I will return to this point later on, in the final chapter. Given this I find that though Harman's suggestions seem to be the most compelling and convincing I have read so far, they are not sufficient in an attempt at solving the non-identity problem.

4.3) Conclusions

In this chapter I have discussed Algander's Harm Principle, which says something about what harm consists in, and lays the foundation for why we should care about harm⁸⁹. We have seen that we intuitively tend to believe that harm is a matter of being worse off because of a certain action, policy or circumstance. This is expressed through the Counterfactual Condition, which quickly

⁸⁹ Because it gives us a reason to refrain from actions.

proves that we cannot harm future generations (since they cannot be worse off). Harman has successfully shown through the objection to the No Regret argument that there can be cases where we are harmed without being worse off regardless of whether we exist already or not. She does this by showing that an action can be a harm to us, regardless of if we gain something greater from the action, meaning that it is not a matter of the benefit outweighing the good on a scale in a measurable way, but rather that the harm will always stand as a harm either way. By showing this, Harman has in my opinion shown that the Counterfactual Condition is problematic without consideration of the non-identity problem, and therefore needn't be problematic solely for the non-identity problem, as it is perceived to be today. I have mentioned a few examples in which it seems that Harman's account fails. The question then could be raised if this will count for all examples? Due to the fact that the examples fail on principle, and not on the specific individual circumstances, it is probable that they will fail in other accounts as well. Therefore we can make a generalization out of these examples, and determine that the account is not successful.

5. Own proposed solutions

5.1) My own suggestions and objections to the Non-Identity Problem.

In the preceding chapters, we have so far not found a satisfying solution to the non-identity problem, at least not one that addresses the problem head-on. One of the main points of focus has been answering the question of whether someone can be harmed by an action without that action making us worse off. It seems the short answer here is “no”. In his article ‘Harm, Benefit and Non Identity’, Algander delves deep into the ontology of harm, separating between harmfulness and doing harm. In his thorough investigation however, there still isn’t a satisfying conclusion. We have seen Harman’s proposed solution of the ‘Healthy bodily state’, which saves us from the threat of no comparison that the non-identity problem is built on, but instead shows us that there is a way of determining harm, even if someone’s existence is contingent upon said harm. I mentioned some objections to this view, however regardless of the objections I find this suggestion to be one of the more convincing in the sense of finding a pragmatic solution upon which we can determine whether future generations can be harmed by our actions. We have also discussed some of the proposed objections to the non-identity problem that have been used as an attempt at solving it. Some of these are less convincing than others, though the less convincing ones are still often thoroughly discussed as serious solutions. Another one of the more convincing arguments is that of Harman’s objection to the ‘No regret’ argument. This claim consisted in the fact that we can consider an action to have been a harm to us, without having to simultaneously wish away every consequence that came from that same harm. If we find this believable then we also do not need to accept the non-identity problem in the first place. Her objection to the ‘No Regret’ argument means that there is a way in which we can have been said to be harmed without necessarily being worse off because of it. This maintains the significance of the harm. This is because the harm that has been done does not depend on the consequences in the future after the action has taken place. Instead the harm stands as a harm in its own right, meaning that even if someone is better off because of an action, the action can be considered a harm if it was a harm in the moment it took place, and if the intention was not to cause someone to be better off. Harman has here in my opinion come the closest to solving the question of whether we can be harmed without being worse off.

In the subchapter on proposed solutions, I mentioned the butterfly effect. This theory is something I would like to bring to light as, if not a solution, but a correction to how we often think of the non-identity problem, questioning its significance on a different foundation than an impersonal view of ethics.

We have mentioned that changes in global policies and other worldwide events, can cause a snowball effect and ‘change’ the genetic shuffle to such an extent that it will alter entirely the individuals that will make up the future generations. After this preceding discussion on the non-identity problem, one can perhaps notice that there seems to lie a deterministic assumption behind this idea. This assumption seems to be that there is a determined set of future people that will come into existence, and any action that we take to alter this set of future people, will not be a harm to the different set of potential future people. This is because they would not have existed were it not for the changes that were made. But there are two problems with this assumption. Firstly, it is not the case that there is a *predetermined path* that has decided which people will come into existence in the future, and that any major changes we make will move us away from this path. Instead, the genetic shuffle is always constantly changing due to minor as much as major changes in world politics. There is no predetermined future generation, in fact the whole idea of there being a future generation at all is not predetermined. What is meant by this is that we are not changing from a fixed group of individuals, these potential individuals are always changing. This doesn’t change or affect the non-identity problem per se, but it does highlight exactly how many factors that play into a specific individual coming into being.

The second objection is tied to the first. Given how small events and decisions can lead us to a completely different life, we know that minor changes can affect who comes into existence. It could be the case that our morally bad or morally good actions cause someone to exist, but we cannot know with complete certainty that a person would not exist if it were not for a certain action. Therefore, given how unpredictable life is, we cannot know with complete certainty that our existence is contingent upon *one specific* action. Perhaps we would have existed both in both alternative routes, meaning that we could regret away an action or a harm, without wishing away our existence. We can say that an action is highly probable to have caused our existence, but it is highly doubtful that we can ever say something on the matter with *complete certainty*. Given this fact, perhaps we needn’t take the non-identity problem so seriously, but rather see the future generation as a whole as what they truly are - necessarily contingent upon *every single* action that is taken by every *single* individual. The non-identity problem relies on the idea that we cannot wish

away existence inducing acts, but fact remains that we are not necessarily doing this. The further into the future the identities will exist, the more difficult it is to pinpoint which act is existence inducing. In the case of climate change there may exist individuals that would have existed in either scenario, therefore they can perfectly well wish away the actions. Except from the moment of conception, we cannot know which actions preceding this were existence inducing.

How are we to get closer to an answer of the main question posed in this thesis, namely whether we should care about the existence and well-being about future generations? I have mentioned previously that though I am not an anti-natalist, I do not believe that we have a moral obligation to reproduce. By this I mean that, although I hold that it is permissible to reproduce, we are under no moral obligation to continue the human race. I do not believe that anyone will be harmed by the discontinuation of the human race. To clarify, I believe that the fact that an *entire generation* may not come into being should not be considered a harm to that potential future generation themselves, since they do not exist. This shouldn't be too controversial given the reasoning that has followed through this entire discussion. However, it could be argued that the reason we could find this statement controversial is because it would in fact be a horrible thing, and perhaps still be considered a harm. But that harm would not belong to those people never coming into existence themselves, but instead the harm would in fact belong to us - *the people who already do exist*.

Given that none of the theories that I have presented in this thesis have been convincing enough, there seems to be no solution to the non-identity problem in the person-affecting view. If this is true, it seems we have no other option but to accept Boonin's 'Bite the Bullet' theory, that claims that there is no solution to the non-identity problem, and we therefore have no moral accountability towards future generations. However, I believe that there is a way in which we can accept this, but also find a reason for us to be accountable towards future generations, all within the person-affecting view. It is important to remember that the idea of future generations not coming into existence is something that matters *to us*, as currently existing people. One doesn't need to look far for us to realise that not only does it matter to us, but it matters to us a great deal. On a small scale we have discussed that when parents decide to conceive a child, they do so on the basis that they want to gift themselves with a child. They do not conceive a child on the basis that they wish to bring that *specific* child into existence, because there is no way they could decide this anyway. No matter how great a parent is, how selfless their actions are as a parent, the decision to bring

someone into existence is a decision they make for themselves.⁹⁰ The same goes when we discuss future people on a larger scale than our own potential children. As I mentioned we care a great deal about the continuation of the human race. Currently Space X and other companies are attempting to expand our potential habitable areas, so that we would be able to live on Mars⁹¹. As climate change is becoming a greater threat to us, it seems that many people are looking for other alternatives into which we can continue the human race. The thought of the human race dying out, means for a lot of people that also the meaning to our own lives dies out. It matters to us that someone will follow us, that there is someone to see and receive what we left behind, that there is someone to move things on. In this sense then, morality when discussing future generations can still be person-affecting, but instead of being person affecting to those people that have not yet come into existence, it is person-affecting for us currently existing people. We would let our principles guide us to the morally right and wrong actions, and the meaning that matters is the meaning to currently existing people. In this sense we have satisfied the person-affecting view, holding that identity matters in moral choices, but changed who the identity *matters for*.

If we have here successfully here established that we in fact already do, and should continue to care about future generations existence, then it is not a far leap to claim that we should also care about their wellbeing. It would be an extraordinary level of both betrayal and cruelty to suggest that we should continue to bring new people into existence to satisfy our own desire for meaning, only to bring them into conditions that are barely livable. If we agree to the previous suggestion that the continuation of the human species is something that matters to us currently existing people and we should continue caring about their existence not for their sake but for our own sake, then I believe that we should also care about their wellbeing. There lies an inconsistency in caring about the existence, but not the well-being of future generations. It is also important to note that the reality is that in all probability there will continue to be new generations, and that in all probability new identities will come into existence in the future years. If this is the case that we continue to bring into existence new identities, we should also care that those identities live in a way we ourselves would consider good enough. An inconsistency may perhaps not be reason enough for us to refrain from harming future generations, but I would briefly mention an analogy to parental moral duties.

⁹⁰ I would like to clarify that is by no means a negative thing. It does not mean that having children is selfish in anyway, but it is important that we keep in mind that it is something we existing people chose to do for ourselves.

⁹¹ www.spacex.com, Elon Musk: The Case for Mars

Though we have no moral obligation to bring forth a future generation, if we chose to do so, there are some moral responsibilities that accompany that choice. Much like we may not consider it a moral duty for a married couple to bring forth a child, if they still chose to do so, they have a set of moral responsibilities that are attached to this decision. Perhaps this could be a way in which we could determine caring about the existence as well as the well-being of future generations to be inseparable.

The butterfly effect has shown that there is no predetermined generation that will come into existence, and we are always the ones affecting who will come into existence in the first place. And in this process of affecting, we never consciously can decide or determine who has come into existence because of what specific action. Accompanied by this, the reason we continue the human race is because of our own desires, on a small scale to start our own family, but on a larger scale to continue the human race to give ourselves meaning. Given these factors, if we are to stay consistent, we should act towards future generations based on our own desire for their continuation and well-being, guided by a set of principles. What those principles would be and how they should be ranked, belongs in a different discussion for now. So far, however, I hope to have shown that regardless of the problems posed in the non-identity problem, there can still be found a reason (within the person-affecting view) that shows us that we in fact should care about the existence and wellbeing of future generations. If we do not think it is enough to care about their existence, we should remember that they will in all likelihood exist whether we care or not, and in that sense we should care about their wellbeing.

5.2) Conclusion

I have in this chapter presented two of my own proposed solutions to the non-identity problem. Firstly I have shown how the butterfly effect seems to question our claims that certain lives are contingent upon certain actions. This is incredibly difficult to pinpoint, making the claim of the non-identity problem weakened to a certain extent. The second argument I have made is that we perhaps may have to 'bite the bullet' and accept that the non-identity problem cannot be solved. Whilst doing this, we can still be holders of the person-affecting view, but change who the identity matters for. I have argued that we should care about future generations wellbeing if we care about their existence. We already do care a great deal about the continuation of the human race both on a personal level, and on a generational scale. This can be shown by the many actions and advancements we make as an attempt to make the world a better place for those who will exist after

us. I have shown that, though we care about future generations, we care about them to the extent that they can offer us meaning to our lives, but that this needn't mean that we care about them for their own specific lives sake. By this I have suggested that we hold a person-affecting view, but instead consider the person affected being ourselves.

6. Conclusion

In this thesis I have attempted to answer the question of whether we should care about the existence and well-being of future generations. This is something that came into question because of the non-identity problem. In this thesis I have been discussing three main claims that the non-identity problem brings to light. These three claims have represented the three possible ways in which we could possibly dismantle the non-identity problem. Firstly I discussed whether we should hold a person-affecting or an impersonal view of ethics. In this chapter I have argued in favour of a person-affecting view, showing that the non-identity problem only appears as a problem in the person-affecting view in the first place. Rather than using this as a means to disregard the non-identity problem, I have argued that we should not be using an impersonal view of ethics in the first place. Given that I have argued for the person-affecting view, the non-identity problem still remains intact. Following from this conclusion, I argued that we should determine conception to be the moment of our coming into existence. The reason for this is that this is the moment in time that our genetic coding is created, determining *enough* of our identity in order to create the non-identity problem. I also argued further that given the lack of comparison, we should regard our existence as morally neutral. Though our lives in total could be considered a harm or a benefit to us, the fact that we came into existence in the first place, cannot. I also mentioned the asymmetry in harm. Here I argued that we can establish that coming into existence is to be considered morally neutral, whilst also holding the possibility open that it might, in some very rare and particular cases, be considered a harm to us that we came into existence. These cases would be those regarding congenital disabilities in which the individual's genetic coding is tied together with the pain and suffering. I also discussed Harman's idea of a 'healthy bodily state' in which she claims that we can use this idea to compare, instead of comparing to non-existence. Harman seemingly avoids the problem of one needing to be worse off to be harmed by using the idea of a healthy bodily state, however I argued against subscribing to this idea. I had two main objections to this. Firstly the fact that anything falling short of a 'healthy bodily state' would consist of someone being harmed by existing, this could include a significant amount of people suffering from minor conditions as well. The second objection I had concerned which idea of a 'healthy bodily state' we should subscribe to. This could be problematic with regards to future generations since the definition of this term will without doubt change depending on when and where it is used.

In the chapter following from this I discussed what it means to be harmed, and whether it is possible that an action can be a harm to us without making us worse off. In this chapter I presented Harman's objection to the 'No regret' view, and her argument that it is possible to regret an action without also regretting the consequences that resulted from that said action. She argues therefore that even if we are not worse off because of an action, that action can still constitute a harm to us nevertheless. However, it can often seem unclear which conditions resulted from which actions, making it hard to determine whether one specific action created one specific condition. I argued that Harman's view is perhaps one of the most convincing ones, but that it is still not sufficient in order to defend future generations moral status.

In the final chapter I presented my own two proposed solutions to the non-identity problem. The first solution is an extension of the discussion on Harman's No Regret view objection. In order to show that we in fact *should* care about the existence and well-being of future generations, we must take the butterfly effect more seriously. Who will potentially come into existence is constantly changing, and it is extremely difficult (if not in some situations impossible) to pinpoint what action will cause different people to exist. There is no predetermined future generation that we may 'change' by taking different actions, instead it is ever changing. Given how unpredictable the circumstances around us coming into existence are, we cannot possibly connect a specific identity existence to a specific action other than conception. Every intricate action preceding this is an intertwined web that will be incredibly difficult to unwind. This is of course no way of solving the non-identity problem, but it is a possible way in which we can hold a person-affecting view whilst simultaneously diminishing the importance of the non-identity problem.

The second solution I have proposed is an extension of Boonin's 'Bite the Bullet' theory. If we are to accept the fact that there is no way in which we can be held morally accountable for the actions that we take towards future generations, perhaps we can find that accountability in a different place, whilst simultaneously maintaining that morality is person-affecting. I argued that the choice to procreate is something we make because of our own desires to have children. On a generational scale we wish to continue the human race, as to give our own lives meaning. I have argued that if this is the case, we in fact then already do care about the existence of future generations. If we already do care about the existence of generations, then we should also, I have concluded, care about their well-being. This is because of the inconsistency in caring about the existence, but *not* the well-being of future generations. Given the conclusion that we should care about the existence and

well-being of future generations, we therefore also have a moral obligation to reduce our emissions. As I mentioned in the introduction, there is no doubt that emissions constitute a harm to us, and will constitute an even greater harm to future generations. Since we have an obligation to care about the well-being of future generations, we therefore also have a moral reason and obligation to do what we can to reduce emissions worldwide.

In this thesis I wished to discuss this question within the framework of climate change, given the monumental incomparable threat it poses to future generations. What does then, this solution mean with regards to future generations and climate change? If we do, as I concluded already, care about future generations, I argued that we should also care about their well-being. If we care about their well-being, then having a habitable sustainable planet to stay on is necessarily included in this definition. This means that there can be no doubt that we must do our best to avoid climate change, therefore meaning we must do our best to reduce emissions. There can be no well-being for a future generation, and perhaps not even any existence of a future generation, if we do not take these measures to hinder the further development that we are facing.

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